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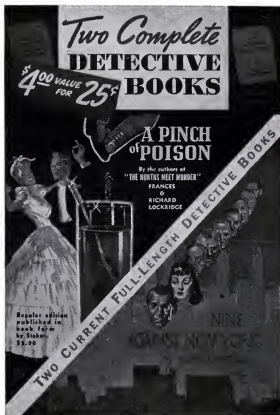
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TASK TO LAHRI

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

The Lahri were a dying race. Inside their hollow, gravity-less world, their life-giving sun was slowly waning. And it was the Earthling's grim, unwilling job to speed their final doom.

THE minute I came into the office, I knew that something was up. My superior, chief of the Tellurian Research Institute, was sitting at his broad desk, staring out the window into the night sky with a sad, faraway look in his eyes. My stomach turned over, and I must have gone a shade pale. Telepathy

Illustration by Leydenfrost





He screamed while I cursed him in a high childish treble

—clairvoyance—call it what you will, I knew that I was in for an unpleasant job, a job that would once more carry me across space to a far planet.

I got a grip on myself, fumbled for my cigarette pack, and cleared my throat.

My superior started. Heavily, he waved me to a seat. I got my cigarette going.

He arose and slowly began to pace up and down behind his desk. Finally, as if by an effort, he raised his fine eyes, and began to talk.

"Sid," he said slowly, "as you know, the human race is spreading over all the System. We're growing. We're proving our greatness, our ultimate destiny. Of all the races in the System, we are the only ones who have ever made an attempt to reclaim and develop the outer planets. That's our heritage, it seems, and we've shed blood and fought, and we'll shed blood and fight again."

"But now our colonization of the outer planets is being threatened!"

I drew smoke into my lungs, bitterly. As my superior knew, I had before this been in the midst of activities in which the human race had had to show its might in order to win a point.

"Go on," I said, thinly veiling my sarcasm. "There's a planet out there in space. And there's a God-forsaken little race of people who are going to be stepped on, and I'm the stepper-onner."

"On the contrary," he said quietly. "They've been stepping on us, and quite seriously. The Lahri, Sid, who live in the interior of a hollow world, the tenth planet.

"Briefly, Sid, this is the situation. As you know, Vitamin Y is essential to life. Earth peoples have it in plenty, because it comes in the rays of the Sun. But the outer planets must ship from Mercury a plant peculiar to that planet which is composed almost entirely of the vitamin. The outer planets are too far from the Sun to receive it naturally. So our colonization of the outer planets is dependent on Vitamin Y.

"Well, for the past ten years, the Lahri have been engaged in piracy, stealing fully fifty per cent of the vitamin from ships bound out from Mercury. We found it out only in the last year. The Lahri, of whom only a thousand remain, apparently

need more of the vitamin than humans. Formerly, they had all they wanted from the rays of their own Sun, which hangs at the center of their hollow planet. But during the last century, their sun has been dying."

"So they had to steal the vitamin from us in order to keep themselves alive," I said slowly. "Which means that the human race is being held back."

"Exactly, Sid. Well, it's up to you and Corey Starr, a research man in the employ of the Mercurian Garden Corporation, to stop it. Starr will be your superior."

"My superior?" I sat upright and said angrily, "Now look here, chief, if I have to take on a job like this I'd rather do it without taking orders from somebody else."

He raised a weary hand. "None of that, Sid. I've been given my orders, and have to pass them on to you. I've managed to get your friend, Will Carrist, as pilot for the ship. You three, briefly, will go to the tenth planet, go to the Bureau of Transmitted Egos and get yourselves some Lahri bodies, so that you can stand the difference in atmospheric pressure and temperature. The Lahri won't like it, naturally, but by law they'll be forced to give in."

My superior drew a deep breath. "Then you'll go before the ruling heads and tell them the Council of Ten has an offer to make to them. Briefly, the Lahri will cease this piracy; they will reveal the identity of the person or persons responsible, so that the Interplanetary Police Force can make an arrest; and finally, the Lahri will move to a certain planetoid which moves close to the Sun, where they will receive all they need of Vitamin Y naturally."

"I see," I said grimly. I arose and ground my cigarette under my heel. I felt the sinking sensation of defeat. "Where," I asked, "does Corey Starr fit in?"

"All I know, Sid, is what I've told. Report to Starr at New York field at two o'clock Tri-Planet Time, tonight. The take-off will probably be immediate. Good luck!"

He sounded as if he thought I'd need it. I turned and left the room.

WELL, it was a relief to see Will Carrist again after a year. We pounded each other on the back and discussed old times. Will was not long on brains, but he had an A-1 pilot's license, and he was probably my best and closest friend.

"But Sid," he cried mournfully, "I don't understand what this is all about. Starr wouldn't tell me anything. He sent me over here to the ship and told me to acquaint myself with the controls. As if I don't know the inside of every type ship that was ever made!"

I said bitterly, "He knows something he isn't telling, the hypocritical, lily-faced—"

The door to the control room swung open all the way, and Corey Starr came in, his lips smiling like Mephistopheles above his close-clipped Van Dyke.

He grinned broadly. "Well, well, Hallmeyer! Glad to know your opinion of me. But then, I shouldn't have been eavesdropping, so the fault's as much mine as it is yours, eh?"

He clapped me heartily on the shoulder, and without a glance at Will, urged his compact, handsome body past to the chart table. I turned red in the face.

Starr leaned over the charts, flicking through them with the frequently wetted tip of his thumb, meanwhile muttering abstractedly, "Declination, 80, arc subtended by vectors at two points—aha!" Without lifting his head, he waved an imperative, beckoning hand. "You, pilot—your name's Carrist, I believe? Come here; this is the course we'll use."

Will's eyes smoldered. "I've already got a course picked out!"

"So?" Corey Starr looked up and his blue eyes were soft with merriment. "So? Well, my good man, scrap that course of yours, and remember you're taking orders from me. Come here."

Will went, baffled anger showing in his wide-set eyes, his abnormally broad shoulders set with rebellion. But thirty minutes later, the ship blasted away from New York Field, and we were following Corey Starr's course.

In the long month that followed, as space closed in about us in our roaring flight across the emptiness, Will and I worked up a growing dislike of Corey

Starr. He was close-mouthed in an open-mouthed way.

"We're going to be busy the whole of this trip, Hallmeyer," he exclaimed, getting me up the first day out after a mere six hours sleep. "Got a few gadgets we'll have to unpack and put together. Come along."

Frowning, I helped him unpack crates in which delicate little lenses and helices and other machinery were packed. We carried them into the large starboard airlock, arranging them in a certain order. Then, acting entirely in the dark, following his orders, I started helping him. It was a long, tedious, disagreeable job. He hummed while he worked, and the first week I didn't bother to ask him any questions. Finally, I couldn't hold my curiosity in.

"Ta ta ta," he grinned merrily, waggling his finger at me. "This is my business, Hallmeyer. Putting it together is yours. Come along, man; by the time we get to the tenth planet, this has to be done."

"Why?" I charged, angrily throwing down a hair-breath screwdriver. "We're going there for only one reason, aren't we? To talk this situation over with the Lahri; to bring back the persons responsible for the piracy. Why do we need this nasty looking mess?"

He picked up the screwdriver, handing it back butt foremost. Deep in his eyes I saw a trace of anger, but you would never have known it from the way he spoke. He laughed softly. "Talk it over with the Lahri? Naturally, Hallmeyer, naturally. But suppose you let me do the thinking on this trip. This machine—well, I think you'll understand better when we get inside the tenth planet. Let's get to work on this, man. This lens goes into the Type G induction box, and the whole thing gets fitted onto the barrel. A pretty conglomeration, isn't it?" He indicated the scattered parts as I wearily gave up, a proud light in his eyes. "Worked it out by myself, Hallmeyer—me and a dozen other men under me. Took a whole year to do it, and if I do say it myself, it took some straight thinking of a Grade A kind. This'll mean some kind of promotion for me."

"I've heard of that Corporation," I

growled, helplessly slipping the casing off the induction box.

He looked at me in a surprised sort of way, then shrugged broad shoulders, grinned affably, and went back to his work as if I were a person to be humored.

I WAS in the control room with Will Carrist, when, ten billions of miles out from the Sun, we picked up the tenth planet. It was a thrill to see that gray dot swimming toward us out of the curtain of light which the stars made on the sky. Neither Carrist nor I had ever been this far from the Sun. There was something indescribably lonely about it. We both felt as if the Earth and the Sun no longer existed, for both had long since merged into obscurity. Yet, ahead of us was mystery, the mystery of an old race, fighting an old battle, living under the shadow of a dying central sun.

"I'm with the Lahri, myself," Will muttered vengefully. "I haven't heard anything about them except they've been doing a lot of pirating—not only of Vitamin Y plants, but of other foods and clothing ships. Starr's against them, isn't he, Sid? He doesn't give a damn about them. Well, I hate Starr's guts, and for the same reason I'm willing to give the Lahri the benefit of the doubt." He added plaintively, his eyes fixed ahead through the view plate on the growing planet, "What's that machine for, Sid? Why doesn't Starr tell us?"

"I think," I told him somberly, "we'll soon find out."

The planet rushed at us, grew swiftly to a spheroid some four thousand miles in diameter. Using the photo-amplifiers, I made out a rocky, inhospitable terrain whose lowest points were covered with hundreds of feet of air-snow. That planet looked so solid that it was hard to believe it was almost perfectly hollow on the inside.

Corey Starr burst through the door, humming a little to himself while he made marks on a little pocket map. He threw himself down before the control board. Will distastefully edged away. Starr jammed his pencil point down on a spot on the map. "There! Carrist, you'll find a big hole in the crust of the planet. Think you can maneuver her through?"

Will lost his temper. "Say," he cried angrily, "I wouldn't have my master pilot's papers if I couldn't edge this ship or any ship through a hole that gave me only two inches to spare, would I? I'll *show* you!"

Starr smiled an impudent smile, and bluffly patted Will on the back. "Go ahead, then," he urged. "Why, I never doubted you for a minute!"

Vengefully, Will zipped the ship once around the planet. We swept once past the gaping, dark cavity in the crust, a cavity that was rimmed with volcanic cliffs. But the next time we came around Will turned the tail of the ship straight up into the sky, brought the nose perpendicular to the planet, roared straight down toward the cavity.

I looked sidewise at Starr, and repressed a smile. He had gone marble-white, his eyes snapping wide. He grabbed onto the console board, staring down unbelievably at the looming hole that rose upward, grew larger as if it were a dark mouth opening to swallow us.

And then, suddenly, the rocket blasts of our ship came roaring back to us as they echoed from the sides of the tunnel. There was a burst of light as Carrist turned on a half dozen search beams. And ahead of us was a solid, basalt wall!

"Carrist!" I suddenly whispered aghast.

But his fingers were playing madly over his console board. The ship swerved—and swerved again. Then, for a racking five minutes, I experienced the most heart-stopping moments I have ever known. The tunnel which led from the outer world to the inner was a twisting, twining, narrow lane, never suited for navigation under such perilous speed. But suddenly it was over, and we burst forth, into the inner world, knowing that only by the suddenly stopping echo of our blasts, Carrist turned off his search beams, grinning happily to himself. He cast a scornful, mocking glance at Starr, whose face was bright with sweat.

But Starr was willing to concede. "You sure do rate your master's license," he breathed. He slowly wiped the sweat off his forehead, then began to rotate the view plates until he picked up the central Sun.

When he finally got it centered, we all looked at it breathlessly. A sense of some unnameable doom, a heartbreak, descended

on me along with those weak, futile rays. Our ship was hurtling straight up toward that Sun, the rocket blasts now off. We saw it as a dim, palling disk of gray, hanging suspended in a dead, cloudless sky. Outside we heard the low moan of a cold, mournful wind, a moan that sounded as if it might have been the combined voice of the Lahri themselves. It was somewhat brutal when Starr's voice interrupted.

"Useless hunk of atomic machinery, that Sun," he said tensely. "Only it's not machinery. It's made out of real, atom-exploding Sun-stuff. Made millions of years ago, by the ancestors of the Lahri, before the human race was ever born. I'd give my right arm to know how they did it. But it's practically dead now—it'll be an easy job, I guess, to put it out the rest of the way."

That sentence exploded like a bomb in my brain. I whirled toward Starr, along with Will Carrist.

"What's that?" I hissed.

STARR leisurely drew his eyes away from the Sun. He faced us. And a peculiar change seemed to have come over his face. It was cold, angular, cruel. All trace of humor, even of a hypocritical sort, were gone.

He said, transfixing us with merciless eyes, "So now it's come. I knew I'd have to explain. First, I want to caution you against living in a dream world—the world you two apparently like to dally with. You've heard the story of the Lahri, and still you want to dicker with them. Well—"

The whole ghastly thing was coming to me, though it was hard to credit.

"Wait a minute," I snapped. "We came out here to talk with the Lahri. Those are the orders my superior gave me."

"The orders your superior gave you!" He laughed gratingly. He drew out a cigarette, inserted it between sharp white teeth. "Your superior, Hallmeyer, is a dupe who never was given the whole story. I was given orders which countermand his, and I'm *your* superior."

He got his cigarette going, blew particles of tobacco from between his lips. He jabbed a finger at us. "Look here, you two, wake up! There's no solution

to this problem, except one. I have it. What are the Lahri? They are the remnants of an ancient race, a race that has been dying off as their sun cooled.

"They need Vitamin Y in quantities which exceeds the supply. They need it so badly they have been pirating food ships for it, and have made it impossible for humanity to settle the outer planets. How, Hallmeyer, will you settle that problem by talking?"

I controlled a growing rage. "By offering them a planet close to the Sun to live on."

He sneered, "And have them become charity patients of the Solar System! Don't be an utter fool. No, there's only one solution. What do you think that machine we've been putting together is, a toy? Surely, you're enough of a scientist to deduce something of what it's about."

I said through my teeth, "Naturally. It projects a powerful vibration with 'jumps' electrons away from the proton to a higher level."

He exhaled smoke. He said smoothly, "There you have it. And think what will happen to that dying central Sun if that ray is projected on it! Atomic disruptions on the interior of a Sun are caused by pressure. Electrons are crowded so close to protons that radiant heat and light are given off. Suddenly, my ray touches these atoms—the electrons immediately jump away from the protons—the Sun goes out! For good." A proud, satisfied look leaped in his eyes. "It's a clever principle. One which I worked out myself."

"Very clever," I whispered, and he did not see my clenching fists. "What are your orders now?"

"To allow the ship to continue on its course. We'll pass close enough to the Sun to spray it with the ray."

Will looked at me. I looked at him. A soundless signal passed between us. We leaped.

Even with two men grappling with him, Starr put up a fight that filled the little cabin with the sound of blows, the grunts and curses of all three of us. Will went smashing back against the bulkhead, a trickle of blood running down his surprised face. Starr's other fist came toward me, his face behind it alight with furious savagery. I let him have it, swinging up

from the hip, putting the whole of my not inconsiderable body into the blow. Corey Starr smashed backward, and even before he tumbled to the floor his face went slack with the slackness of complete and lasting unconsciousness.

Panting, I turned to Will. "All right," I snarled. "We did for him. Turn this ship and put it down outside the city of the Lahri!"

I was fuming, boiling over. I stood there cursing steadily and furiously. Every time I looked at Corey Starr, I felt another burst of the over-powering rage. Deliberately to contemplate murdering a whole race of people; to be *proud* of inventing the weapon which would accomplish that wholesale slaughter in one fell blow—it was too much for me. I ran back to the lavatory and I was sick.

I was starting up the companionway again, when I felt the ship come to a rest. I came up behind Will.

"The city's over there," he said, shivering.

I understood a little why he shivered. Looking through the view-plate, at first I could see nothing except a grayness which was all the more gray because of the faint light. Then some of the mist must have cleared away, and I saw those gray edifices rearing somberly upward like tombstones. There were hundreds of them, all massed together, of different shapes and sizes—and what heightened the tombstones effect was the fact that those buildings leaned at all possible angles to the cold, cracked surface. Like wraiths, little clouds of mist curled slowly around and through that city, sometimes slowly approaching arched, open doorways, seeming to hesitate, then darting in for all the world like living creatures.

THE city was huge. It must have stretched for an appalling number of miles. But I knew in my heart that most of it was empty, that here and there, in scattered places, the remnants of the people lived. My fascination in the weird, hopeless looking place made me look for unending minutes. I felt the same pall of dread, heard the slow footsteps of death dragging himself along his age-old trail—the same emotion that must have gutted the minds of the Lahri. An ineffable,

clinging sadness took hold of me, and finally I turned to Carrist, gesturing toward the lazarette.

Obediently, but curiously, he broke out two space-suits. We got into them. I worked the airlock valves, and leaving Corey Starr where he was, breathing stertorously in a lifelessness that would last for more than an hour, Carrist and I stepped from the airlock.

Stepped? Hardly! We went straight out from the ship, on a slow line that was parallel to the gouged ground. We floated along for a full minute, stupidly watching that tombstone city coming nearer to us, before Carrist and I woke up to what was happening.

Carrist gave vent to a half-scream. "Sid! We're not falling! We should be down there!" He pointed wildly down to the ground some half-dozen feet below us. His face was contorted with a supernatural fear.

Of course, I knew what it was right away. Carrist, excellent mathematician that he is, is still short on brains and imagination. I explained to him, meanwhile inadvertently moving my arms in such a fashion that I was now floating along head nearest the ground.

There wasn't any gravity! I had known that before we ever came here. There just isn't any gravity in a planet that is hollow, or approximately hollow. All gravity forces cancel out. It was fully possible, if one wished, to jump clear across the interior of this planet, and land with the same speed one took off. I explained that to Carrist.

It did not reassure him. "But how do we get down?" he cried. "How do we move around? Sid, we're going straight toward that tombstone there!"

It was true, and I found myself shivering again. This particular tombstone, really all of a hundred feet high, with numerous arching windows and doors at the levels, leaned at a thirty degree angle with the ground. But it was deserted, as was attested by the scrawny, skeleton-like trees which twined their limbs through the windows and literally around the building—skeletons twining their bony arms around a tombstone. The simile was too apt and I shuddered it away.

Carrist was really frightened at even

going near the place. But we couldn't help it. Carrist gave up, and followed my example of grabbing hold of one of the trees and working my way to the ground. Finally, our two feet were on the ground, and we were looking at things in the right perspective again.

Carrist hung miserably to his tree, afraid that the slightest motion would send him up again. He turned to me. He chattered, "But what's the good of this? Why are we leaving the ship? Corey Starr still has the projector. As soon as he wakes up, he'll use it on the Sun, and then we'll die along with the Lahri! Why didn't we destroy the projector?"

"We're already in deep enough water without making things worse," I told him morosely. "Technically, we mutinied, than which there is no worse offense. If we had destroyed the projector, we might have come up before the Council of Ten themselves!"

Carrist gasped, "You think the Council of Ten is behind this?"

"Who else? They hold all power in the System. Through them all laws and decisions are made. The Mercurian Garden Corporation, of course, were the instigators. They saw their company being ruined. That's all they gave a damn about. They offered to take care of the Lahri for the Council of Ten. The Council knew it was a tough situation, so they just washed their hands of it, and gave the Corporation all the freedom it wanted to work out the solution anyway they wanted. So they got Starr busy on that damned projector."

Carrist dragged his eyes away from the dismal city. He said miserably, "But what if Starr uses the projector? We'll freeze, too."

"He won't use it. Simply because," I added grimly, "I doubt if there are more than a dozen pilots in the whole system who could maneuver a space-ship back through that planet-hole without cracking up. Understand? You're the ace in the hole in this game, Carrist, and Starr won't make a move to use the projector until he gets hold of you again. Remember it. So stick close to me, whatever you do!"

Carrist gulped, staring. "I'm the ace in the hole?" he said. He began to shake his head doubtfully, forebodingly, but as

I started pulling myself along, deeper into the jungle of crazily leaning edifices, he came hastily after me.

IT was singularly easy going, since we could simply scoot along the ground for great distances. Strange how much that city looked as if it were on the floor of the sea—fingers of mist moving about almost purposefully, the twisting vines and erratic trees, the soundlessness, the laxness of the building—all contributed to that effect. A graveyard in the sea, these buildings rising to mark lost hopes and dreams.

Somewhere on the outskirts of the city, we found what we were searching for. The Bureau of Transmitted Egos, erected by interplanetary law on all inhabited planets. We pushed ourselves toward the high, domed building, disappointed that so far we had seen no natives. I went ahead, forcing myself by sheer will-power into the ghostly interior. The high dome rose above us finally, like a single deep bass note growing louder and louder. Finally we stood before the long counter, in almost complete darkness. Falling from the ceiling of the dome was a single aged rope.

I looked at Carrist, who looked slightly green. He pulled the rope with a muffled groan. It was like heaven opening wide when the pure, voluminous tolling of that bell sounded through the city. It was a sweet sound—as sweet as Gabriel's horn calling all the dead to appear! Carrist jumped back, his face ghastly. The bell kept on tolling, and we felt like damned sinners who had disturbed the dead too soon.

"Stop that thing!" I said violently, and I brought the rope all the way down, frantic. But the bell merely burst into renewed activity and kept it up until we felt like running away and hiding.

We hardly noticed, then, that we were suddenly bathed in a shaft of mellow light from above. Carrist and I went rigid, and slowly turned. The light was coming from a balcony, from a doorway that had opened soundlessly. And silhouetted in the doorway was a figure clad in hood and flowing black gown. We saw nothing of the face, only a pair of glowing, phosphorescent eyes staring down at us.

Carrist edged closer to me. I could feel his space-suited body trembling.

I opened my lips to speak—once, twice. The third time I whispered, "We are here—"

"Because we're here," Carrist said throatily, half hysterically. Finally he shouted, "We want a couple bodies!" He used the universal tongue.

The witch-figure continued to stare down at us.

Suddenly its head turned, apparently looking at someone in the lighted room behind it. "Below are two members of the robber race."

A sweet, sexless voice answered broodingly. "Robber race, robber race, gobbling up the worlds apace, see them triumphantly approaching their doom, shoving the others out of their room."

The silhouetted figure burst into a ghoulish, high pitched chuckle. Then it said again, "Below are two members of the robber race."

The scream that came was like the maniacal voice of a macaw. It chilled our blood. "*Give them their bodies!*"

Immediately, the witch closed the door, cutting off the mellow light, and flung herself from the balcony.

She—for we knew it was a woman—floated across the room, and seized the bell-cord. Miraculously, the bell stopped. The witch shinnied down the rope and at last stood behind the counter.

And she was a witch! Long, hooked nose, rotten teeth, eyes that were actually filled with an inner light. I began stupidly to believe in my Mother Goose nursery rhymes.

The wicked eyes leered at us. The thin lips opened and a foul stream of curses flowed out at us. She ended up with a final burst of rage. "May all your children die in their mother's wombs! *May your Sun go out!*"

I stared at her through popping eyes. With an effort I grabbed hold of myself. "Now, now, sister," I said huskily, "that's not a nice thing to say. Suppose we get down to business. We want a couple of nice, sane bodies. Do you have any sane people around here?"

She seemed about to throw herself at me. Instead she flung a pad down in front of us. Hastily, Carrist and I

sketched in our names, our occupations, some facts about our ancestry. We checked off our requirements: as much of the mind, conscious, unconscious, as much of the instincts and memories, as we could take without allowing our new bodies to take control of our own minds. In other words, the works.

"And we're in a hurry," I added orally, thinking uneasily of Corey Starr. By this time, he would be waking up. Waking up—to do what? To carry out *his* original plan, while we carried on ours? It was a ghastly thought. I could just imagine this Sun suddenly going out, plunging this world into absolute zero temperature! But Starr couldn't do that without Carrist!

The witch's eyes grew in brilliance. "In a hurry," she hissed. "The robber race is always in a hurry. Some day it will have to hurry to catch up with itself."

With this rather meaningless phrase, she threw herself across the room like a shot. Anxiously, Carrist and I did the same, following her. She sailed through a door, maliciously slamming it behind her. Carrist and I came out of it without broken bones, and burst into vicious profanity.

We were sizzling when we finally caught up with her, but the surroundings in which we found ourselves sobered us down. The transmitting machines! They surrounded us in grim array, and Carrist and I felt the sinking sensation always attending a transferral.

The witch beckoned to me with a horny hand. There was only one small light in the room, and I could only see her eyes. Casting Carrist what I felt was a reassuring glance, I went jauntily into the shadows. But it was with quaking heart that I seated myself in a grim looking chair.

She yanked at my arms, binding them to the arms of the chair. A switch threw a generator into high. She unscrewed my helmet, and while my head swam dizzily from the sudden change in air-pressure, she put her ugly, unhealthy face close to mine.

"You will take care not to harm the body," she snarled. "Such is the law! *Aheee!* May your race perish, and may your Sun go out, if there is a single

scratch in the body of the child after you have finished with it!"

THE child! I gagged. For, coming floating through a door, their pipe-stem legs dragging after, came two shadowy figures. It was too dark to see their features, but they were children! Children perhaps no more than ten years old. I started to yell out loud, dimly remember seeing Carrist coming across the room toward me, then a wave of gas hit my nostrils, and my mind was in that half unconscious, yet somehow crystal clear state which would permit my consciousness, instincts, and memories, almost all of them, to go flowing into the brain of the child whom the old witch now strapped into the chair opposite me; to go flowing along a wire, to reassemble themselves into their original status of giant molecules in the gray matter of mine and the child's brain.

I heard Carrist expostulating frantically with the old witch.

"We want full-grown bodies!" Carrist yelled. "You old witch!"

But she screamed back at him, and I gathered that she was highly amused. And finally Carrist must have realized the hopelessness of the position, for he became quiet, as the transferring machinery sparked and whined.

But he did win his own argument, for, fifteen minutes later, I stood beside him in his new body, and he was an adult, some five feet in height, while I was a boy, a youngster, scarcely three feet tall.

I was completely beside myself. I swore at Carrist. He stood there, his acquired face looking abashed, plainly miserable. And all the while the old witch cackled and chuckled. But finally she tired of that.

"You didn't specify the age you wanted," she cackled. "But why shouldn't you have a child's body. Your race is a child, while ours is old, old—older than the planets themselves, perhaps! Who knows? *Aheee!* You have not given me my money!"

While Carrist rifled my barely conscious body, I stood there shaking with rage. He paid the old witch her two thousand univers, then carried our bodies to separate shelves, carefully adjusting the humidity

and air-pressure. I yelled at him, and pushed myself out of the building. Then I let loose my fury on him again.

"A fine help you are," my piping voice yelled. "What good am I in this body? These people have a nasty sense of humor. They'll laugh at me. And I can't let you do the talking!"

Carrist squirmed miserably. "She wouldn't back up. She just kept on going through with it. I couldn't do anything."

I snarled at him, but I realized that he was right. We had been fooled, and fooled royally. Nevertheless, dreading what I might find, I began exploring this body's mind. It was a child's mind, young, inexperienced, unacquainted with the city. I cursed. Yet I did feel something running through this mind, A voiceless, unconscious longing to look at the Sun. I raised my eyes, and let this mind have full sway. A prayer grew in my mind, a plaintive, wailing cry that carried within it the lost hopes of the damned. At first I thought the prayer, but then I knew I was speaking it aloud: "O Sun, that was built by the Ancients, wherein the Ancients reside, where is your light, that has fallen upon the Lahri for all the life of the Lahri? We grow cold, and there is an oldness about us that was never ours. The Great Mother She sits upon her throne through the cold hours, and there is no warmth in Her divinity. Sun, shine upon Her, for if Her cries can bring no light and no heat to warm Her, how can our cries bring light to warm us? O Sun, that was long ago built by the Ancients—"

It was a prayer learned by rote. I was half floating in the air, my arms outstretched, my own mind frozen into the status of a watcher. Ghostly mist fragments washed around my body. My wailing cry went drifting off through the hopeless city. Suddenly, it was too much for me. There was too much horror implicit in the wailing tones. I struggled to reclaim my acquired body, but I am afraid it would have been a hard job without Will Carrist.

"Sid!" His cry blasted in my ear. He grabbed me, and shook me like one demented. "Sid! You're letting it get you. You can't! We have to get this over

with. We have to find the rulers. The first thing you know, Corey Starr—"

That name was like a suddenly applied lever which threw my own mind on top. I shuddered, shook my head, and grabbed into a tree limb to steady myself. I turned a white face on Will Carrist—or, rather, the short, squat, shrivel-legged being that held the mind of Will. "That prayer," I whispered. "Did you hear it, Will? It came out of the mind of this child. It came bursting out, and it was genuine, because the child has felt the cold, the lightness—"

But Will was only staring at me, and I realized that he didn't know. He couldn't know the terror of a Sun that was going out, of a god that had deserted its people. For he not yet looked into his acquired mind, and I did not want him to!

I turned and looked over the silent city. "Will," I whispered, "we are going to find the Great Mother She!"

AS we worked along through the city, Will's adult body kept on shooting him along faster and faster, until finally I was panting to keep up with him. When I shouted imprecations at him, he said hopefully, "I could carry you."

I cast him an outraged glance, and went on ahead. But a phrase occurred to me that only made me sorer: "And a little child shall lead. . ."

I pulled my short, curiously braided coat up around my chin and impelled myself on. The deadly gloom of the city grew as we penetrated deeper into it. The buildings leaned crazily. But it was not until we were entirely lost that we had our first glimpse of the natives.

It came like a shock. A number of figures came bursting like falling leaves from an upper window. They were children. They burst into excited cries when they saw me and came sailing at me. In a second, I was in the midst of a rough-and-tumble squawl such as I have never experienced. Childish, gleeful cries burst against my ear drums. I suddenly squealed with rage, and threw my playful attackers off. They dispersed away from me like a cloud, expertly catching onto trees and tall weeds to keep themselves from "falling" into the sky.

One and all they stared into my eyes

with awakening horror. Suddenly, one screamed tinnily: "He is not *he*! He is not *he*!"

The rest got the drift, and commenced to scream, hanging onto their trees like fruit, scared stiff. I was as scared stiff as they, and I felt an inner convulsion of horror for myself. Within me, a tiny mind was protesting vainly. "I *am* her! I *am* the child of the Great Mother She!"

I stilled that cry, and whirled toward Carrist. His peculiarly clammy, acquired skin was green with a tremendous fear.

"Sid," he whispered imploringly, "this is a like a night-mare! These people are crazy. You heard that old witch, didn't you? You heard the jingle that other voice dashed off, didn't you? They're insane, down to the last child!"

I didn't listen to him. I was listening to another thought inside me. "Why are the people watching? Why do they stare?" And, suddenly, with my own mind, using these ears, I heard the faint rustlings, the whisperings that emanated from the buildings around me. I looked up quickly. My phosphorescent eyes saw other phosphorescent eyes motionlessly suspended in dark windows—watching, watching. One by one, as I stared them down, they disappeared.

Will, following my glance, comprehended. "Watching us," he burst out huskily.

I said tonelessly, "Will, take me to the Tower of the Thousand Steps."

He looked at me as if I were mad. He cried frantically, "The Tower of the Thousand Steps? I don't know anything about—"

"Be quiet," I admonished tonelessly. "You know where it is. The mind that lies below yours does. I am a child, with a child's experience. You are an adult. As such, you must lead me to the Tower."

His face was torn with fear and a desire to obey my command. Finally he groaned. "Sid, I can't," he whispered. "I'm afraid to go poking into one of these insane minds."

With a wave of my tiny hand, I cut him off. I started toward a V-shaped aperture made by two thin, tall edifices where they rested against each other crazily. I stopped short. One arm hooked around a small, crooked tree, the

other straight at his side, a Lahri with phosphorescent eyes stood, blocking my path. He gave stare for stare. I turned in the opposite direction, with Will helplessly following, muttering pitifully to himself. Another Lahri blocked my path here.

We turned back in the direction we had come.

For minutes we worked our way along, feeling like ghosts in some unreal dream. We passed round solid-looking edifices which were, however, worse than the Tower of Pisa in their leaning proclivities. Even without the aid of my body's mind, I could have told that they were storage bins, loaded to the brim with the Mercurian vitamin plant, with other food-stuffs, with stolen goods of every description.

And in a square at the heart of the city we found a late model space-ship, resting on a long run-way which turned up at the end. Will's breath sucked through his teeth as his eyes encompassed the long powerful lines of the vehicle.

"The pirate ship!" he whispered.

I nodded woodenly. It was the pirate ship.

We turned to the left here, and were blocked again. I knew what was happening now. The Lahri were guiding us somewhere, forcing us to go there; but where? Dimly, I thought I knew the answer. And so we went on.

And now the music began. It was a mocking, insidious drum beat, interspersed with elfin, piping noises. It penetrated my mind, my whole consciousness until I was in a half hypnotic state. It flowed from everywhere, seemingly, swelling and dying plaintively. I pulled myself along as if I were in a dream. I forgot Car-rist. I forgot that—abruptly—he was with me no longer. I vaguely remembered hearing his startled shout, the sound of a scuffle, of furious blows, of a final, dying groan. Then nothing. I forgot him, and I forgot that Starr needed him.

NOR did I seem to realize or care that a host of Lahri were now moving like wraiths along beside me, moving in from the mists on either side, from gaping doorways. I was half Lahri and half Tellurian, and I was moving toward the

Tower of a Thousand Steps, the Praying-Place of the Great Mother She, who was my mother, and in whose blood flowed the blood of the Ancients, and the fire of the sun-god who was withdrawing his radiance.

Now the crazily leaning edifices started falling away, widening out to form a great, hidden square. The music swelled in a great burst that sustained itself. Then I was looking upward, up along the slope of a great pyramid whose top lost itself in creeping, living mist. I felt in my mind the voiceless longing of a child for its mother; a child who is in terror of something it cannot understand.

Around the pyramid, I now saw that a great mass of Lahri were gathered, holding onto each other, the ones in front grasping a railing which ran around the base of the pyramid. Those in the back were suspended in the air, their heads above those in the front. Holding onto each other thus, they were like a great blanket of living beings, waving in each cold breeze.

A lane was cleared for me. I found myself pulling myself up the pyramid by means of a guide rail. Slowly, slowly, the top of the pyramid unfolded itself to me as I crept upward, now alone. And the higher I went, the colder the air became. Winds began to lash at me, to bite freezingly through the single-braided garment I wore. The sun showed itself as I arose above the damp mists which overlay the city. It stood starkly alone in a dead sky, hardly more alive than its background.

Still came the insidious drum-beat, the hypnotic piping sounds, coming from I never knew where. And a sweet and sad voice spoke down to me from the top of the Tower of a Thousand Steps: "Come, my child, in body defiled, the winds here blow colder, the Great God is older, I pray to the Great God to warm up the cold sod, but come those from the cavity, in awful depravity, what do you do with my child?"

I looked up, and it was if a shining radiance had burst in my brain. I knew who I was. I was Sidney Hallmeyer. I was half-way in possession of my own thoughts, and deliberately keeping it that way. But I was halfway the child of the

Great Mother She who sat on her hammered lead throne atop the Tower of a Thousand Steps. And she was beautiful, as seen with the eyes of her child and of me.

Beautiful? She was a Lahri, completely without clothing, and her legs were shriveled pipe-stems. She was squat, short, and hairless, and her mouth was abnormally wide. But there were her eyes, and somehow the beauty in them spread out over the rest of her body, and she became a creature of ethereal, divine loveliness. My acquired heart beat painfully, noting the suffering in her face, the blue pallor of cold which the freezing winds induced in her. For it was cold up here, and she sat there naked, completely composed, in her mind her prayer to the Sun god, to warm her, and if it would not warm her, such was the will of her god.

She looked at me with her phosphorescent eyes, and in their pained depths was an understanding that transcended words, an understanding of me, Sidney Hallmeyer.

And sitting at her feet, wrapped in great swaths of cloth from which only his face protruded was a monstrous little dwarfed man whose phosphorescent eyes were alight with the most vicious, virulent hate I have ever seen! I stared back at him and felt within me the revulsion and fear of the mind of the child whose body my mind occupied. And I felt something else, staring into those eyes. It was uncanny, it was impossible! But the thought grew in my mind, and with the thought the face began to sneer smugly. I shuddered in fascination, and suddenly blurted out:

"Starr!"

I wanted to scream out loud that this couldn't be. That Starr wasn't actually sitting there, at the floor of the Great Mother She's throne. But I suddenly knew it was so. How else and why else should I have been herded here? And Will! For the first time, I fully realized that Will was gone, remembered the sounds of his struggle. Starr had done that! Will was essential to his plan. Without Will, he himself could never have left this hollow planet, could never have maneuvered the ship out alone. But if Will had been captured, then why—?

Starr, whose body was that of an old, old man, leered at me twistedly. "Starr it is," his cracked voice whispered, while his eyes glared with a malevolence that seemed entirely uncalled for. "You utter fool, Hallmeyer, for going off and leaving me! Now we're both in a predicament we'll never escape from. Wait and see."

"But—but how—" I gasped, utterly forgetting the Great Mother She.

Starr said bitterly, now speaking English, "I told her what you were up to, Hallmeyer."

"What I was up to?"

"Naturally. I told her you were scouting the lay of the land, that later on members of the 'robber race' were intending to come and empty their food warehouses. That you, personally, were going to take back the Lahri who were responsible for the pirating. Oh, I painted you blackly. And I told her that I would take you two off her hands!"

"Starr—" I began, hardly able to contain myself.

His acquired face twisted in a sneer. "Oh, don't get your dander up, Hallmeyer! I'm in a pickle, too. I should have looked you up myself instead of going to her and listening to that damned sing-song poetry of hers. She said she would have to judge you on the Tower of a Thousand Steps, and since only royalty was allowed there, I would have to acquire a royal body. This," Starr sneered bitterly, "is it," and he shivered with a convulsion of inner disgust.

I CAST a single glance at the Great Mother She. A great wave of pity enveloped me. Her faith was great in her god, the Sun, but she could not still the little shudders of coldness that ran over her body. She was freezing, and another hour of those blasting, biting winds would turn her into an icicle. I felt a bitter hatred of Starr, who could so complacently remain swathed in his garment.

The Great Mother She did not interrupt our conversation, but her great, beautiful eyes were helplessly staring from one to the other of us, as if trying to determine what we were talking about.

Starr's voice came again above the whine of the cold wind, above the drumbeats

and the tiny piping sounds of the invisible musicians. "I," he said, casting a bitter sidewise glance at the Great Mother She, "am *her* husband! Can you feature it? But that's the way it had to be, and the old gander seemed actually pleased when I told him outright that I didn't want to occupy his filthy body. He screamed his amusement at me like a crazy parrot—very funny! I protested to the Great Mother She—whatever *that* means—that all I wanted was Will Carrist, and to hell with you. She said some of her people would capture Carrist and put him in an appropriate place, but still she wanted me as a witness on the Tower of a Thousand Steps. She wanted to hear your side of it."

Involuntarily, Starr tensed, his acquired eyes shooting out phosphorescent sparks. "But if you say a word of it to her," he began passionately.

"Don't think I won't!" I flashed. "You're an old man, Starr, and I'm a child. In a hand-to-hand fight, I think I could do for you." I turned to the Great Mother She and spoke in the language of the Lahri—spoke tenderly to her, as a child would speak to its mother. I told of our discovery that the Lahri had been pirating the ships of the Earth Federation; told her that we understood the reason for that pirating; told her further that we considered it wrong of the Lahri to take illegally what was not theirs—and she held up a hand, pain in her eyes, and spoke in the ritual of poesy, whose scanning was set to the weird drumbeats that pulsed around us.

"The Sun god dies, the Mother tries to appeal to the wise, and the Council defies! A century flies while the Lahri dies."

She held me with her great, glorious eyes, and I knew what she had been telling me—something I had not been told before. A century ago the Lahri had appealed to the Council of Ten, appealed for relief from the stark, cold existence of a dying central sun. The Council had ignored the appeal. The Lahri had been forced into piracy after a century of misery, of starvation, of death.

My heart actually ached from what was implied in that briefly told tale. I ignored Starr's tense body, the savage look in his rheumy eyes, and stretched forth my arms,

hypnotically caught up in the pulse of the music, the crystal quiet of this pyramid whose apex raised above the comparatively warming mists of the city below.

"Great Mother She," I whispered reverently, "the Council of Ten no longer ignores you. It holds salvation open to you. Your sun dies, and will not revive itself. Why not, then, seek another world close to our Sun god, who blazes fiercely and benevolently in the heavens, and will look upon you and your people with the same favor that it looks upon ours? I know of such a world, Great Mother She, which spins swiftly around our Sun, and is yours for the taking!"

I held my breath, praying with every atom of my being that she understood, and that, understanding, she accept. And in the interval Starr's mocking whisper came, in English. You're a fool, Hallmeyer. I *know* her answer."

"Shut up!" I said tensely, directing my hate on him. I spoke to the Mother again, in tones of warning, "This the Council offers you, Great Mother; and there sits beside you the representative of him who would direct upon your Sun a weapon which will put his light out at once and forever if you do not accept."

I was ready for Starr when he came, and he did come. He was on a spot for sure, and he realized it. His plans were not crystal clear in that moment. He was in the grip of rage. That I should actually dare to ruin his original plan, to betray him, was too much for him. The scream of a macaw came from his throat, and he placed one withered leg on the hammered lead throne of the Great Mother She, and pushed himself down at me.

I met him fair and square, one of my child's hands gripping the post of the rail by which I had pulled myself up, the other arm outstretched and ready for him.

He caught onto the arm with hands that were extended like claws. The velocity of his rush tore my grip on the railing loose. And we went floating out into the open air, into a gravity-less atmosphere, where we hung, engaged in the battle of our lives!

We clawed at each, we struck, and Starr's acquired face was a bestial mask of hate. He screamed while I cursed him in a high, childish treble. And once or

twice, in our wild gyrations, I saw the face of the Great Mother She, her face torn with longing and suffering. I was her child, the body of her child, and I was in battle with the aged body of her consort.

We were not evenly matched, as I had erroneously supposed. Starr's body had a wiry venomous strength that could snap my bones if his hands ever got a good hold. I kicked at him frantically, left long welts on his bald head with my nails. But suddenly, I saw my only chance, but if I calculated wrong, it was Starr, and not I, who would benefit.

We were fluttering around without suspension like a pin-wheel gone mad. Off to one side, a few of the cold buildings of the city rose from the creeping mist. To the other side was the pyramid. If I worked it right, I could get rid of Starr, and get back to the pyramid!

If . . .

I waited for the propitious moment, desperately waiting until I was underneath as we turned. I got myself into position, and with one furious effort kicked upward with both my shriveled legs.

The force of that blow was not very much. But it was enough. It separated Starr from me, and he went floating away, his bestial eyes staring at me in sudden shock. For a moment I was desperately afraid that, inadvertently, it was *I* who had been on top—but it wasn't. I was floating back through the air at an angle toward the pyramid!

And Starr was floating at an equal and opposite angle in the other direction!

Floating straight up into the sky, with no way in this universe to change his course; floating toward the Central Sun.

I landed, frantically grasped hold of the guide-rail, my tiny chest heaving torturedly with my late exertions. I looked upward toward Starr just in time to see his mouth open wide in a great, agonized scream.

"Hallmeyer! The Sun! I'll fry. . ."

And then his voice diminished into a tinny scream, even as his body seemed to become a dot against the pitiless, deadly glowing disk of the central sun. For hours he would float at that speed, and then the small gravity pull of the sun would exert itself and that would be the end of Starr.

I turned slowly and started up toward the Mother again.

SHE was staring down at me with a somber fright showing in her eyes. She paid no attention to Starr, who was in the body of her consort. She let him float away. I began to talk to her, still panting. I told her of the plan which Starr had had, a plan outlined to him doubtless by the power of the Mercurian Garden Corporation. I spoke of the weapon, of what it would do to the Sun, and with pointing arm I turned her eyes in the direction of our ship, scarcely a mile distant, near the Bureau Transmitted Egos.

Then her glance came back to me. Her lips opened, and horror and unbelief trembled in her golden, liquid tones. She whispered, "Let death loom if the god hangs now in his tomb. If he wishes to go, if he wishes to go, the robber race's weapon will not make his blood flow, the robber race's weapon will not make *his* blood flow!"

While I was dizzily trying to translate that, she did an astounding thing. She stood upright, raised her thick, short arms toward the sun and let loose a wordless, wailing cry that shivered by marrow. It was a prayer and a plea and a resignation. I felt something in my acquired mind pulse to that voiceless chant. And so piercing was that cry, that it must have floated through that tombstone city, striking upon the ears of the Lahri who were gathered at the foot of the pyramid. For there came an answering wail from the assembled throngs. It was too much like the cry of the invisible dead to me, and as appropriate. My teeth chattered.

Once more the Great Mother She, the queen of the Lahri in whose blood flowed the blood of the Ancients, turned her glorious, pained eyes on me. Longing swept her face, a voiceless longing for the body of her child whose mind my mind occupied. Then,

"My child, who is yet not my child," she whispered sadly. "With your reasoning pure, there is no cure, for the bubble world of the Lahri, is unlike the universe starry; there is no heavy trouble in the Lahri's planet bubble!" and she was gone.

Gone? I did not know until half a

second later. For, with a motion too swift to follow, she lowered her squat body at an angle, placed her naked, withered legs against the grey, hammered lead throne, and like an arrow shot herself away from the apex of the pyramid on a line parallel with the ground. She diminished as my dumbfounded eyes watched.

Too late, I understood her intentions. The drum beats, the fairy piping sounds, abruptly were no more, and their absence seemed to place on my heart a terrible, foreboding burden, but left me free to think things out clearly. I knew where she was going, and somehow I knew what she was going to do when she got there. And that implied other things. . . .

In another second, summoning what strength I could, I threw myself into the air along the same path she had taken, toward our ship.

It was slow, that fantastic flight above the wreathing mists that enveloped the city of the Lahri. I knew it was too slow. For after ten minutes I was able to look down, to see the outskirts of the city. Our ship was scarcely a hundred feet distant. Frantically, I waited until the angle of my flight allowed me to grasp at the very roof of the tallest building. I hung on for the merest second, gauged my angle and flung myself at the ship with every atom of my strength. I sailed through the air, hands outstretched. The air-lock was open. If I could make that. . . .

I couldn't. I sailed over the ship, grasped at a projecting port with both arms—just as the rocket blasts roared.

It was the most surprising thing that ever happened to me. Suddenly, wind was roaring against my face, and what little of the city of the Lahri I could see out of the corner of my eyes disappeared. The rocket ship was in flight, was boring up through the atmosphere at tremendous, accelerating velocity, and there was a dead emptiness all about me.

I screamed in my childish voice. I hung onto the port, lying on my stomach on the cold surface. The wind pushed at me, literally ripped every shred of clothing from my body and I commenced to freeze solid. My eyes popped, and then the mind of the child in me rose and I had eyes for nothing but the Sun. I

prayed. I prayed to the Sun god, for I knew that I was to die. I asked it to warm my people, and to warm my mother, who was the Great Mother She. I asked it to make the lands grow green again, to bring back the white clouds that once made beautiful holes in the blue-black sky, to bring the gentle rains and to make the Lahri great again, so that they could resist the might of the robber race. But I was glad that the creature within my body, my child's body, was also to die with me, for that creature was a member of the robber race.

And a fifty mile wind literally tore me off the back of that speeding rocket ship, my arms and stomach and chest bleeding, and the wounds freezing. The coldness entered my brain, and insidiously began to solidify my thoughts, and that was the last I knew.

I LOOKED up into the panic-stricken face of the Lahri who was Will Carrist. And the floor beneath me trembled to the roar of rocket blasts!

When my eyes snapped open, he gave a great cry of relief. "I thought you were a goner," he cried piteously. "I came shooting up out of the city with a half dozen Lahri after me and I was scouting around in this ship looking for some sign of you when I saw our rocket ship go zooming up toward the Sun. And you were hanging onto it. Sid, it's crazy! Why on Earth you ever. . . ."

My child's voice broke in. "You talk too much, Will." Warily, trying to collect my befuddled thoughts, I staggered to my feet. I looked around. We were in the lounge room of a ship ourselves. I tried to think how that could be, and then remembered the Great Mother She, and the rocket ship she was driving toward the Sun.

Without a word to Will, I ran to the control room, clambered to the control seat. But I was too small. I screamed furiously for Will. Anxious to please, he seated himself at the controls. The ship shook down its length and leaped into speed.

And as the ship roared toward the central sun, I strained my eyes, sweeping the dull sky around the sun with the photo-amplifiers. Suddenly, I picked up our

ship, far far ahead, a tiny dot glowing with the reflection of the sun rays.

"She mustn't," I whispered through my teeth, paying no attention to the smarting wounds on my body. "She mustn't!" Will must have thought I was crazy, but suddenly he must have understood, for his powerful jaw fell slack.

He said slowly, "She did."

Yes, she had. Everything seemed to fall apart inside me. I felt a great weariness flowing through me. It was the sun. It was going out.

That sun couldn't have been very large. Maybe only a half-thousand miles. But for untold millions of years it had blazed brightly and it had been the god of the Lahri. And now that god was dying. True, it had been more than half dead. It was little more than a very hot planet. But it had kept the Lahri going. It was ironical that one of the Lahri, the Great Mother She herself, had killed her own god.

I turned wordlessly away from the photo-amplifiers and sat down quietly. After a while I spoke. "The Great Mother She is dead. Her people soon will be. Carrist, Starr should still be up here, drifting toward the sun. We have to find him."

Carrist did not find him, though he searched for an hour in the sky under the shadow of the darkening sun.

We finally turned back toward the city of the Lahri and the Bureau of Transmitted Egos, while I sat quietly in a corner, thinking to myself and quelling the voiceless cries of the child of the Great Mother She. Thinking. I realized what must have happened to Carrist, without his telling me. He had broken loose from his captors, and thinking that I had somehow gotten us into a tight spot, had headed straight toward the pirate ship, somehow got inside ahead of a horde of Lahri. After all, he could operate any type ship, no matter how complex the controls. Well, he had come along in time to save me . . . which didn't seem to matter a whole lot to me now.

The ship landed almost in the very doorway of the Bureau of Transmitted Egos. Quietly, we left the ship, and I stood for a minute, accustoming my eyes to the new darkness that was engulfing the tombstone

city. What was that I heard? A wail that drifted ghostlike through the mists, the wail of a people bereft? I walked toward the Bureau of Transmitted Egos, fighting down the horror of the child within me. I entered the door and I sought light switches.

I was not even thankful when dim lights did come on. It meant that the Bureau was still supplied with power. But I didn't care.

From the center of the cold floor as we entered, a bedraggled figure raised itself to hands and knees, and started crawling toward us, croaking a strange hybrid of English and the universal tongue.

"Hallmeyer! Help me! I'm dying—I think I'm dead. My body."

I said coldly, "Hello, Starr. What brought you back? I wish you weren't."

HE clawed wildly toward us, panting. "It was *she*. She picked me up out in the middle of nowhere. I was her consort's body. She wanted to save it. She put me in the lifeboat, telling me to go back to my people and tell them that she—yes, *she*—was the pirate, together with some of her Lahri. And she was, Hallmeyer; the Great Mother She was herself the pirate. No wonder she could drive that ship! Don't you see? And she made me show her how to use the projector!"

He was irrational. I suspected that he was dying, from the cold he had endured and from the blood that was running out of his nose. The lifeboat had crashed, and he could crawl here, dying.

I said, "I suspected she was the pirate."

Then he slumped forward and stiffened. I turned him over and listened to his heart. He was dead.

I turned to Carrist and said dully, "If he really dies there'll be hell to pay."

Carrist understood and went madly to work. He dragged the dead Lahri body to the transmitting chair, in another minute got Starr's real body out. He strapped both in, and frantically went to work. The dimly lighted room jumped with currents driven under high voltage. And Starr's real body stirred, his eyes opening wide. He strained at the straps that bound him, and sweat leaped to his face.

He looked at the dead Lahri body and trembled. He whispered huskily, "My

Lord—thanks, Hallmeyer! You brought me straight from hell!”

I loosened him. I said coldly, “And you sent the Lahri to hell with that damned clever weapon of yours.”

Starr probably didn’t like what he saw in my eyes, but he realized too that I had a child’s body, a body moreover that was covered with dried blood.

He lost his temper. “Well, what the hell do you think you’re going to do about it? If there’s anything I hate it’s a sentimentalist, Hallmeyer, and you’re being a sentimentalist from the guts up.”

I motioned Will and Will understood, because he felt the same thing I felt. He came up behind Starr and whirled him around and planted a haymaker in Starr’s face that sent him clear across the room to smash into a far wall. He bounced back, and hung in the air, his body very relaxed and quiet.

Will got his own body into the transferral chair, and then placed himself in. I got the machinery going, and accomplished the transferral. The Lahri shot out of his seat, cast us one wild glance, and fled from the building. It was the last we saw of him.

“Evidently he didn’t enjoy the company of your mind,” I told Carrist, mirthlessly.

He cast me a wounded look and went about the job of strapping me in. And I sat there, thinking some more. I understood much that I hadn’t understood before. I remembered the last words to me of the Great Mother She. “There is no heavy trouble in the Lahri’s planet bubble!” A cryptic phrase whose meaning came to me now. No heavy trouble—no gravity trouble. Living on the outside of any planet which could hold an atmosphere, the Lahri would have sickened and died, for they were not used to gravity. They *had* to stay in their bubble, where gravity forces canceled out. That was the reason their legs had atrophied. They didn’t use them except for pushing. That was the reason the builders of the city had constructed edifices at such crazy angles. Wasn’t any gravity to pull them down.

The machinery went into action, and again I went through the strange experience of being in two places at the same time. As our minds went back to their

rightful places, I saw the child through my own eyes, the child saw me through its eyes, and vice versa. It was uncanny, particularly when I saw the quiet fear begin to burn in the eyes of the child as it received all of its mind back and got rid of mine.

When it was over, the child, the son of the Great Mother She, sat tense, staring at us. I impelled myself from the chair. Shuddering I took the straps away from the child. It sat there, looking not at me, but thinking, and listening. Coming from the tombstone city was a thin wail.

The child pushed itself away from the chair and went moving ghostlike out the door. It stood there in the door, staring out at blackness. The Sun had entirely gone out. A freezing, windless cold was settling into my very bones. In spite of myself I followed the child into the darkness, and I heard no sound from the city. The only illumination came from the Bureau, and that was thin.

My nails were digging into my palms. The child was standing near a tree, arms outstretched upward toward an invisible sun, and it seemed to me that there was a blue pallor on its naked body.

There was nothing that was worthwhile for me to do. I heard the beginning of the child’s prayer to the sun, the prayer it had learned by rote. It was a thin, wailing cry.

“Carrist!” I panted. “We’re getting out of here.”

He nodded and grabbed hold of one of Starr’s feet and came out to meet me. He looked for one long moment at the ghostly, crazily leaning buildings that showed now as no more than shadows. There was no vestige of sound coming from the dead city of the Lahri. There was no sign of the child. I knew in my heart that the people of the bubble world were dead. I knew they all thought they were going to live with their forefathers whom they knew as the Ancients. They would all be warm. They would never be cold or hungry again, and they would not have to fear the robber race. That was good. That was very good.

I felt better.

But I was not very glad to be a human being.

The Cosmic Derelict

By JOHN BROOME

Ever-deeper into that Sargasso of space the Earth-bound *Lucifer* bored. And guiding her, mocking her, was the fabled, gaunt-skeletoned Flying Dutchman of the stars.

IT was Tug Skelly's fault that the Starways freighter, *Lucifer*, four hours out of Orion City, was running behind time; and Captain Christopher Douglas, Starways' newest and youngest Old Man, found it hard to maintain the dignity befitting a transgalactic skipper, as he inveighed against the guilty bo'sun in his cabin.

"Twenty-four hours lost in port, Mr. Jackson," Captain Douglas groaned, dropping the latest triangulator readings to his desk. "A full day we can't possibly make up! And no one to blame for it but bo'sun Skelly!"

First mate Pete Jackson, who had just brought the computator results into the cabin, responded to the captain's forlorn glance with a clucking noise and a sympathetic grimace of his blue-eyed, terrier's face. There was no doubt that Douglas' vexation with Tug Skelly was justified; but Jackson felt called upon to put in a word for his unfortunate shipmate.

"I wouldn't be too hard on Tug, sir," Pete Jackson said placatingly. "He may have some queer ways, but after you get to know him ye'll likely find Tug a pretty valuable hand aboard ship."

"All I would like to know," Captain Douglas returned unhappily, "is why in Old Nick he had to nose out that stowaway in Orion right at blasting time? Why didn't he just keep that big turnip of his where it belonged!"

Jackson shrugged helplessly. The *Lucifer's* youngish, new skipper just didn't know Tug Skelly yet, that was the truth. It was clearly no part of a bo'sun's duties to hunt down stowaways; but then Tug had never been content to perform only his duties. The plain fact was that the stowaway, a pink-skinned Orionian, had sneaked aboard right after loading was finished. He was apparently seen by no

one except the usually sleepy-eyed Tug; but that alone proved more than enough to spell the poor devil's doom.

"If it hadn't been for the Orion port authorities, though," Mate Jackson essayed weakly, "we'd have blasted on schedule. I know Tug didn't intend to stir them up, sir."

"No!" Captain Douglas jeered miserably. "I suppose not. But that infernal racket he raised chasing the stowaway was enough to bring the whole city aboard!"

Jackson nodded sadly. The Orionian port officials, summoned by Tug's wild bellowings, had swarmed on the ship *en masse*, like a brood of pink and imperturbable owls. They helped Tug snag the first stowaway; and then, over Douglas' frantic protests, they very slowly and astiduously fine-combed the *Lucifer* the rest of that night for others. They didn't find any more stowaways, but by the time the *Lucifer* got clearance an entire day had elapsed, leaving Captain Douglas in a near catatonic state. The guilty Skelly meanwhile had mysteriously disappeared under-deck—where, for all Jackson knew, he still was.

First Mate Jackson stirred uneasily. A suspicion suddenly shot through his mind regarding Tug's possible motive in acting the way he did. But the little first carefully refrained from voicing his thought. If it were true, it would definitely not help the big bo'sun's case with Captain Douglas!

"Like I said, sir," Pete Jackson contented himself by sighing, "Tug's mostly a first-rate bo'sun, though sometimes he does get sort of queer ideas. However—" Jackson added hastily, "you can depend on all the boys now. I mean, Captain, Sparks told us about that message that came from the owners a while back; you can bank on it we'll all do everything-pos-



"Shipper!" he screamed, "Look! Look there!"

sible to help you make up the time."

"Thank you, Mr. Jackson," Douglas said gratefully. "I appreciate that."

Captain Douglas spoke with some composure, but, after Jackson saluted smartly and left the cabin, the young skipper's *papier mache* dignity melted rapidly and he slumped down into his swivel. The first officer's promise was merely a gesture, as both men knew. The *Lucifer* was at top speed, doing better than ten and a half kilos, but the computer showed that even that would fetch New York nearly twenty hours late. Christopher Douglas' usually trim blond mustache drooped woe-begonely, but he was too miserable to straighten it.

Instead, he parted the braids of his breveted uniform and drew a crumpled slip of paper from his breast pocket. The radiogram Jackson had referred to was from A. J. Braithewaite himself, president of Starways. It had come only a few hours before; and, re-reading it, Douglas could still hardly believe his own ill luck. Belated rocketings were always held against Starways skippers; but the *Lucifer's* tardy arrival threatened to be starkly tragic.

Captain Douglas, the gram went, Solar Council going off platinum standard as of twelve midnight July third. Imperative that you bring Lucifer in as scheduled by noon that day. Any delay in arriving will cost Starways huge sum on your cargo of platinum. Am certain you will not fail us. Braithewaite.

DOUGLAS sank down into the swivel until his smooth, clean-shaven chin almost rested on the desk top. The spanking new *Lucifer*, cargoing a bin full of Orion's precious powdered platinum, was Chris Douglas's first real deepgalactic command—after years of school theorizing and practical activity as everything from a galley-knave to a blast-wiper. He loved his new ship; but already his first voyage under his own ticket threatened to be his last! Starways' hard-boiled employee policy might well put him on a muck-ridden asteroid run after this, or ground him altogether.

Chris Douglas groaned and ran a limp hand over his moist face. He hadn't felt more sheerly miserable since he was turned down by the lady of his choice when he

was fifteen. The lady, to be sure, was almost twice his age then; but even so her answer still rankled. She was his schoolmarm, and she had made it painfully clear that under no circumstances would she consider becoming engaged to a fat little appleknocker like Christopher Douglas. Her name was Lucy; and it still gave him a pang to recall her cool gray eyes and her—

"Beg pardon, Cap'n. Are yuh busy?"

Douglas looked up with a start. A big face—quite different from the beautiful vision in his mind—was framed in the aperture formed by the partly open cabin door. It was a thoroughly, almost enjoyably, ugly face, that looked as if it had been kneaded by a crazy baker. It possessed just about the color and consistency of limp dough. Captain Douglas straightened slowly in his seat as he gazed on it.

"Skelly!" He said ominously, "come in!"

Bo'sun Tug Skelly came in cautiously, as if he were afraid of wrecking the daintily appointed cabin by one awkward movement of his great, brawny frame. He held his cap very respectfully in one gnarled hand; but his huge face wore what Douglas thought was an altogether out-of-place grin. He looked like an overgrown urchin who is caught swiping pies but is unrepentant because of a full stomach.

"I suppose," Captain Douglas said icily when the big bo'sun stood before his desk, "that you know what your shenanigans in Orion has cost, Skelly!"

"Yessir," Tug grinned unblushingly, "but don't let that bother yuh too much, Cap'n. Shux, so long's we got rid o' that stowaway everything'll be shipshape, never fear."

"Listen, Skelly," Captain Douglas rose holding the shreds of his dignity around him with a shaking hand, "are you aware that we could have cargoed that Orionian from here to Betelgeuse and back for what the lost day is going to cost?"

Tug nodded brightly. He was obviously not too impressed by his young superior's analogy. "Sure, Cap'n," he said easily, "but we wouldn't have got very far with him. I mean we'd've had an accident o' some kind. Maybe a rocket tube woulda slipped its moorings; maybe the

graves woulda gone dead without no reason. But something woulda happened—that's the godshonest truth."

Captain Douglas's eyes, red-rimmed from lack of sleep, opened wide; then narrowed dazedly. He was remembering something Mate Jackson had said about queer ideas.

"Yesiree, Cap'n," Tug spoke confidently since he obviously held the new master's undivided, even spellbound attention. "Everybody knows a stowaway's bad jinks; but not many aside from Tug Skelly knows jest how bad an *Orionian* stowaway can be! Cap'n Douglas, an *Orionian* stowaway's no different from a cargo o' loose cordite. He's jest bound to cause mischief on a ship."

"Mischief!" Captain Douglas felt that that was a poor way to describe the fix they were already in; but he didn't pursue the point. Another aspect of the bo'sun's speech drew his attention. It was obvious that in Tug Skelly, he, Chris Douglas, was confronted by a withering example of ignorance on the loose. All the new skipper's years of training, his sleeplessness and his distraught nerves, rose gorgelike at this shambling, dough-faced anachronism who posed as a space sailor.

"Bo'sun Skelly," Douglas said acidly, "your remarks reveal an incredible disregard for the scientific viewpoint. In fact, I haven't heard such sinful tommyrot since I was six—and even then I knew better. An *Orionian* stowaway, or any other stowaway, Mister Skelly, can cause no more damage to a vessel than the amount of edible cargo he can consume. The rest is rubbish."

Tug looked hurt. "I dunno, Cap'n," he said slowly. "Now you take the *Campanella*—the big liner that jes' blew apart one day off Venus. What did the Safety Board investigation show afterwards? Why, that she was carrying a whole nestful of *Orionians* underdeck!"

And Tug flashed his young master a look of triumphant vindication. Chris Douglas heaved a long breath and slumped back in the swivel. The task of bringing bo'sun's Skelly's education up to date was clearly not one for a single afternoon. Nor, with Braithewaite's message still before him, did the skipper feel any taste for the job.

"Bo'sun Skelly," Douglas sighed disgustedly, "did you come here to regale me with your views on *Orionian* stowaways?"

"Eh?" Tug scratched his head and grinned a little at the captain's peculiar way of talking. "Naw, but I almost did forget, sir. Fact is, Cap'n, I come to tell yuh how to make up the day we lost. Yes-sir."

"You did!" Douglas sneered miserably. "How? By getting out and pushing? Or simply by wishing on a star? The *Lucifer* can't do any more than ten and a half kilos."

"She don't hafta," Tug said equably, no whit abashed by the irony. "We can gain a lot o' time by using an old route I know. I forget the real name, but it's called the Pass o' the Twin Witches. It's at the tip o' the Southern Cross, Cap'n. Joshua P. MacLevy, my old skipper, used to tell me about it. It'll save—"

BUT Chris Douglas was no longer heeding the big bo'sun. His eyes, which had widened suddenly as Tug spoke, were now peering at the great blue and white astrochart on the wall back of his desk. He rose and fixed his gaze on a little star-clustered area far off the main commercial routes—the tip of the Southern Cross. Then he sprang to the desk and began working with a pencil. A moment later, he looked up strangeley excited. It was no wonder he hadn't thought of the Cross Straits—the old pass had been out of use for over fifty years. For vague reasons, it still had a bad name and skippers avoided it. But Chris Douglas was no shell-backed worshipper of traditions.

"Skelly," he said regarding the bo'sun with new shining eyes. "I think you've got something! Using the old Cross Straits will clip nearly a million kilos from our course, and give us a good chance to fetch New York on time. A very good chance!"

Captain Douglas's sudden, almost boyish enthusiasm was infectious, but now it was his bo'sun's turn to become oddly perturbed. The wrinkles on Skelly's massive face were as big as troughs.

"That's right, Cap'n," Tug nodded uneasily, "but the Pass is pretty dangerous, yuh know. If yuh leave it to me, there won't be no need to worry, though. I know how to fix those hags so they can't

touch the *Lucifer* no matter how hard they try!"

"Hags?" Captain Douglas said with a now friendly smile. "What hags are you talking about, Tug?"

"The witches, Cap'n, that guard the Pass." Tug's voice had dropped to a whisper and he leaned forward with a fearful, secretive air. "There are two o' them, Cap'n Douglas. One on each side. Giants they are, and woe to the poor ship as passes under their hot breath without first undergoin' the ritual o' purification! But don't you worry, Cap'n. I know the formula that'll wash all the sins from the *Lucifer* and leave her clean as a baby. Yes sir!"

"What the dickens—!" Captain Douglas began with a dazed frown. But Tug Skelly went on hurriedly; it was clear that he regarded the young skipper's astonishment as an evil omen.

"All we gotta do, Cap'n," Tug pleaded, "is give the *Lucifer* a pure white soul; and I can do it. Jes' let me handle it, Cap'n Douglas, and those two witches won't bother us a bit."

"Do'sun Skelly!" Captain Douglas swallowed hard and gathered his benumbed senses. "I have heard tall tales and weird stories; but for sheer cockeyed balderdash yours is far and away the best yet! Your suggestion of the Cross Straits was invaluable; and I am very grateful to you for it. But by Jupiter if you go on talking about Twin Witches I'll have to clap you in irons. Good day."

Tug started to protest, but something about Young Douglas' clamped jaw made him halt and drop his big arms to his sides miserably. He stood there for a moment before mumbling a low, "Aye, aye," and offering a clumsy salute. Then he turned and walked from the cabin, his big shoulders drooped despairingly.

Captain Chris Douglas mopped his brow when he was alone in his quarters.

"Witches," he murmured incredulously. "Purifying the soul of a ship against witches!"

He gave his close-cropped, blond head a vigorous shake, as if to clear it of any goblins or pixies that might have crept in by contamination with Tug Skelly; and a second later he was at the desk communicator contacting the bridge.

"Mr. Jackson," Captain Douglas said when he heard the mate's voice. "I have decided to change our course. You will take all readings necessary to bring the *Lucifer* to the Straits of the Cross. . . . Yes, Mr. Jackson, I said the Straits of the Cross. At once!"

THE *Lucifer*, a hollow black needle in the immense twilight of space, hurtled eagerly on the second day out toward the new pole her tiny masters had set for her. But First Mate Pete Jackson alone on the bridge didn't find himself any too eager about their new route. For one thing, the last three ships known to have tried the Cross Straits had never been heard from afterwards. For another, Jackson just didn't feel easy traveling off the main lanes.

He had intimated his fears to Captain Douglas at mess that morning; but without making any impression on the young skipper.

"Sure I know about those ships that were lost in the Straits fifty years ago," Captain Douglas had responded cheerfully, fresh from a much needed sleep. "But that was fifty years ago, Mr. Jackson. Those early ether-blasters were just clay pigeons to space hazards that can't even tickle the *Lucifer*. Our ship is equipped with every modern safety device known to astrogation. I think we'll get through all right."

Pete Jackson rolled the captain's words over in his mind and shifted in his seat before the visiplat with a sigh. A moment later, he jumped with a startled oath as a heavy finger prodded his shoulder. It was Tug Skelly, looking as big and mournful as a Great Dane bereft of his master. But Pete Jackson wasted no sympathy on his ungainly subordinate.

"Hah! It's you," the little mate said with fierce scorn. "I suppose ye've come to tell me about those witches of yours, eh? Well, you're wastin' y' time. Captain Douglas's already told me about your crazy ideas; and I must say you made a proper fool of yourself before the new skipper, Tug. I'm thoroughly disgusted with you!"

"Pete," Tug pleaded, "it's true what I said about the Twin Witches. Old Josh MacLevy told me about 'em, and you know he wouldn't jes' spin a yarn. Listen, Pete,

all I need for the ritual o' purification is a lot o' white paint. You gimme a release for the paint and I'll attend to all the rest. Please, Pete."

But Jackson was adamant.

"First off," the mate grunted sourly, "we ain't got a pail of white paint aboard. Second, I wouldn't give it to ye, if we had it! The trouble with you, Tug, is you need some education. You're worse than an old Irishlady when it comes to superstitions, and that's a fact."

Captain Douglas had used those very words to describe the bo'sun when he and the mate spoke at mess. But Pete Jackson felt no qualms of plagiarism in borrowing the apt phrases. He even remembered a little more the new skipper had said.

"Tug," Jackson advised with a superior air, "I think you'd better take a home study course next voyage in the elements of physics and chemistry. That's what you need—a little educating. Take it from the Captain and me."

For a long moment, Tug Skelly played miserably with fingers that were like bananas. Then he heaved a sigh and turned. At the bulkhead, however, he looked back.

"Edjagation," he asserted with a truculent nod, "ain't everything, Pete. No, sir!" And with that Tug lumbered out.

Pete Jackson snorted and turned troubledly once again to his forward sight. The nearer the *Lucifer* got to the Straits, the more the first mate found himself wishing they were back on the good old slow lanes. There were no familiar skymarks here; and the *Lucifer* was being guided by dead reckoning. Yet, remembering young Douglas's words, Jackson took heart.

"Witches!" Pete Jackson scoffed aloud to the empty bridge round him. "Hah!" But the sneer didn't sound too convincing even to himself.

It was the beginning of the long middle watch, when most of the *Lucifer's* crew slept; but Tug Skelly returning to his bunk didn't go right to sleep as usual. Instead, he paced his narrow deck for many long minutes—before finally beginning an activity that would undoubtedly have astonished any of his shipmates if they had been awake to witness it. Out of his cabin locker, Tug dragged his battered bulger. And as he donned it the bo'sun's

massive face, gargoyle by the port starlight, wore a strangely desperate but determined expression. He went down into the holds and stayed there for some time before he finally emerged on the hull.

All during the long watch that ticked away inside the peaceful *Lucifer*, a shapeless, bulging form toiled outside her hull. The myriad stars roundabout blinked in amazement at the tiny, squid-like object that moved on the great hull. They watched with endless curiosity as the moving blob several times disappeared from view only to reappear again. And they marveled greatly at how the aspect of the hull was changed wherever the restless object toiled. When finally the blob disappeared for the last time, the stars blinked in delighted wonder at the vision he had left them. The middle watch inside the *Lucifer* was not yet ended when Tug Skelly crawled out of his bulger and toppled into his bunk like a stricken Sequoia.

"CAPTAIN. Captain Douglas."

The *Lucifer's* young skipper opened his eyes, focused them on the lad who was shaking him by the shoulder, and sat upright. It was Andy, the galley-boy, who stood before the bed, his tow-thatched face screwed up puzzledly.

"Captain Douglas," Andy said scratching his head, "the cook sent me to wake you. He said to get you up. It's something about the ship, sir."

"Something about the ship!" Douglas was out of bed like a shot. "What are you talking about?"

"The *Lucifer*, sir," Andy grinned mysteriously. "She's all white outside—like a yacht. The cook saw it first this morning when we were emptying the slop pail. He says she's beautiful, nicer now than A. J. Braithewaite's yacht. The cook said that."

"He did?" Chris Douglas rubbed the last vestige of sleep from his eyes and strode to the communicator in his outside cabin, where he proceeded at once to contact first mate Jackson.

"Mr. Jackson," Douglas said suspiciously when he got the mate, "did you give orders to paint the hull? What? Yes. Unless Andy here is crazy. Put on a suit and meet me at the forward lock at once."

Two minutes later, Captain Douglas and first mate Jackson, each clad in bulgers,

climbed laboriously out of the lock. Both men stared in simultaneous astonishment at the sight that met their eyes when they emerged on the broad hull. Around them, the *Lucifer's* former dark steel torso was now a sea of glistening whiteness. Every inch of the hull had been covered; the *Lucifer* preened like a snowbird under her frosty new plumage that stretched from stem to stern. Reaching down a gloved hand, Douglas found that the paint was still tacky, a little of it came away on his fingers.

"*Jumping Jupiter!*" Captain Douglas whispered shakily. "What's going on here? First, our crazy bo'sun starts chasing stowaways in port; and now someone paints my ship a pure blasted white while I'm asleep. What kind of a voyage is this. Mr. Jackson!"

But as he spoke the words "pure white" a gleam of suspicion shot into the Captain's eyes.

"Skelly!" Douglas said with sudden vehemence. "Skelly's ritual of purification."

Mate Jackson nodded troubledly. The connection between Tug's latest remarks and this deed was all too apparent. But something more was worrying the little first mate at the moment.

"Maybe it was Tug, sir," Pete Jackson said puzzledly, "but what I'd like to know is where the devil he got all the white paint? I happen to know we moved every can of paint off ship to make room for the platinum. Yes, sir. I had it done myself."

"The platinum?" Captain Douglas repeated the word very slowly; then he stared for a long, terrible moment at the white stain on his fingers. Pete Jackson stared at the stain, too. A second later, the two men broke as one body for the lock behind them.

Down in the hold where the platinum was kept, Captain Douglas panted heavily, and stared about him with the haggard look of a man who has received a mortal blow.

Around the two men, the precious cargo had been vandalled. The empty tins were strewn all over the hold. Of all the powdered platinum, perhaps a dozen or two cans remained intact. The rest of it—and no other conclusion was possible—now adorned the steel hull of the *Lucifer!*

"Bring Tug Skelly to my quarters, Mr.

Jackson," Captain Douglas said in a mechanical voice. "Under guard if necessary."

BUT Tug came to the Captain's cabin without protest, even though he came not too happily. There shone, however, under bo'sun's Caliban countenance, the kind of inner serenity that can only come from doing the right thing regardless of consequences. Captain Douglas eyed the culprit wrathfully.

"Bo'sun Skelly," Douglas shot out when Tug stood before his desk, "all I want you to do is answer one question: Was it you who painted the *Lucifer's* hull during the last watch?"

Tug shifted his big feet uncomfortably; but his serene expression did not vanish.

"Yes sir," Tug confessed. "I did it for the good of all of us. It jes' had to be done, Cap'n Douglas. Because now those witches—"

"Mr. Skelly!" Douglas cut in shakily, "are you aware that you used eight-hundred-thousand dollars worth of platinum to paint the ship! What are you trying to do, man—" the young skipper's voice rose to a croaked scream—"buy those damned witches off?"

Tug shuddered visibly at the profane reference to the dreaded Giants of the Pass.

"I wouldn't talk that way about them, Cap'n," he shivered, "no, sir. You see, the formula for purification includes platinum—that's according to old Joshua MacLevy. But I couldn't find any white paint at all. So I jes' had to use—well, what came to hand."

"Which happened to be our cargo of platinum," Captain Douglas murmured incredulously. He sank into his swivel like a man in a dream. It was still possible, of course, to salvage much of the precious metal from the hull. But doing the job now, while en route, would mean a suicidal delay; while bringing the *Lucifer* in, festooned as she was, would very likely mean his ticket. Misery seemed to threaten both courses equally; but the young skipper felt he had no choice. Somehow—white or black—the *Lucifer* had to be brought in on schedule.

"Mr. Jackson," Captain Douglas said with forgivable bitterness, "you will have bo'sun Skelly confined to irons for the remainder of the run. We may all lose our

jobs for this, but with him in the holds, we'll at least have a chance to complete the voyage alive!"

THE *Lucifer*, now a white spear cleaving the darkness, reacted to the proximity of the Cross Straits like a cat to danger. All flight regulations were strictly enforced, by the Captain's special command. Every instrument and delicate warning device was tested out and brought up to specifications. The ship took on the grim aspect of a citadel prepared to withstand any eventuality.

Only bo'sun Tug Skelly was idle as the *Lucifer* neared the Pass. In the tiny cell underdeck, Tug accepted his enforced inactivity with the resignation of a martyr. But he learned from Andy, the galley-boy, that the *Lucifer's* white coat lay still untouched, and that brought him some comfort.

"There's things about spacin'," Tug told the boy, as he ate the food Andy had brought him, "that nobody learns in books. Don't make no mistake, Andy, edjocation is good—but it ain't everything. Nossir!"

"Nuts," Andy remarked picking up the fast-emptied tray. "I've heard that the skipper is gonna have you examined in New York. Says you're bugs."

Tug stared ahead of him and nodded with a long-suffering look. "People with real knowledge," he said slowly, "is always considered bugs, Andy. Sure. Look at Mad Old James Flaherty, the man who first reached Moon. And before him there was a feller named Gally Leo who told everybody the earth moved around the sun—like it does. Everybody thought they was bugs, until it turned out they was *geenyusses!*"

"Yeh," Andy grunted unimpressed, "only you *are* bugs."

The galley-boy's simple but crushing logic left Tug without a reply. He merely growled contemptuously and watched Andy, as the boy leisurely gathered his utensils and exited from the cell. Alone, the big bo'sun shivered suddenly and sat motionless on his cot as if transfixed. It seemed to Tug that through the thick bulkhead before him a low, far-off wailing sound was coming—a sound just like the one Old Joshua MacLevy had described. By Tug's private reckoning, the *Lucifer*

was right at the Straits. And that wail could only be—! Despite the careful and costly precaution he had taken against the Witches of the Pass, Tug Skelly's eyes began to bulge.

Up on the bridge, a few minutes before, Captain Chris Douglas also witnessed a peculiar thing. It was mate Pete Jackson, at the forward sight, who called his attention to it. Douglas reluctantly tore his gaze from the gleaming, many-dialed instrument panel before him, and answered the mate's summons.

"A cloud," Jackson frowned. "Dead ahead."

They were at the lips of the Straits; a few moments more and they would be inside. Captain Douglas glanced hurriedly at the plate. A vague and nebulous gray mist was swirling before the ship; but even as he watched it, it seemed to melt away and disappear. Douglas quickly volted up to maximum the ray-repellers and meteor-deflectors that lined the *Lucifer's* hull.

"Whatever's in the Straits," Chris Douglas said grimly, "is going to bounce right off our hull. The *Lucifer* was made for heavy weather."

"Sure thing, Capt'n," Pete Jackson said wistfully, "but I can't help wishing we were through already!"

"We'll get through," Douglas said with more confidence than he actually felt. "The Pass can't be more than twenty-thousand kilos long. We'll be out the other side before you can whistle Home Sweet Home."

"I couldn't whistle anything now," Pete Jackson sighed as he bent his wizened face to the visiplate.

For a few moments, it looked as if the Captain's optimistic prediction might be justified. The *Lucifer* was covering almost a thousand yards every tenth of a second. It was after about five seconds that the wailing and shrieking noises first came through the hull into the bridge.

"Stars and saints above!" Pete Jackson stiffened slowly in his seat, his little blue eyes engulfed in whiteness. Captain Douglas, too, jerked nervously at the eerie sounds. But the dials before him continued to reveal nothing amiss. He shot a quick, hard command to keep the course. The mate obeyed trembling as from ague. A split-second later they were in the Pass.

THERE wasn't any doubt they were in something! A wave of superheated steam seemed to strike the *Lucifer* simultaneously from all sides. The needle on the tempogauge jerked sharply upward. The pressure oxygen in the bridge grew suddenly warm. Captain Douglas and mate sweat in a trice.

"What's this?" Pete Jackson started from his seat.

"Can't tell what it is," Captain Douglas frowned before the dials. "The tempogauge is going up, but I don't know why."

"Hah!" Pete Jackson's laugh broke queerly. "It couldn't be the hot breath o' Tug Skelly's witches now, could it, Capt'n?"

"Witches be blowed!" Douglas snarled.

"Still," Jackson protested weakly, "it might be a good idea to turn back, even now. That tempo-needle's going up awful fast."

"Hold the course, Mr. Jackson," Douglas said angrily. To execute a slow turning maneuver at this point would be tantamount to suicide! Jackson knew that too, only the mate wasn't using his head any longer. Whatever danger they were in, their best chance was to hold speed and try to slip through the Pass before the blistering heat outside melted down their hull plates.

The mate steadied in his seat.

"Give her everything she'll take," Captain Douglas ordered the engine-room via his speaking-tube. "Everything!"

"Aye, aye, sir." The choked reply from below was followed by a long, muttered oath that almost made young Douglas grin. He called down a word of encouragement, and stepped swiftly back to the instrument panel. The tempo-needle was mounting in the dangerous red ever closer and closer to the hull melting-point. The heat inside the bridge was insufferable by now; the two men, stripped to the waist, their bodies shining oilily, could hardly breathe. The shrieking outside had risen to a horrendous, deafening clamor. The end, one way or another, could scarcely be more than a few seconds off.

"We can't take much more," Pete Jackson gulped miserably. "She'll open a seam sure!"

"Jackson," Douglas said with sudden thought, "better get Skelly out of the hold.

If the ship goes, we might have a chance with the emergency-dories." The thought was futile though, and both men knew it. A temperature that could melt the *Lucifer's* hull would reduce one of the flimsy dories to ash in an instant. Nevertheless, Jackson got to his feet. But, before he could take a step, something in the port sight caught the mate's eye. Pete Jackson slowly stiffened until he stood rigid and pallid as a corpse.

"Capt'n Douglas!" Jackson cried in the weak and despairing voice of a man whose innermost dread is all too horribly realized. "*There's the witch!*"

WITH an impatient frown, Douglas sprang to the port plate where the mate's gaze was transfixed. But the vision that met the skipper brought him up in his tracks. An icy chill trickled down Chris Douglas's spine despite the terrible heat around him. A great black shape, long as the *Lucifer* herself, loomed beside them; half-shrouded in mist, huge funereal form now rode alongside the freighter, so close that hissing sparks from the *Lucifer's* steaming plates sprayed it. Like some grim and timely escort from beyond, the apparition kept pace with the stricken white ship.

"Merciful Mary!" Pete Jackson gasped incoherently. "We're done for now, Capt'n!"

Douglas ran a dazed hand over his sweat-ridden eyes, opening them wider. Then, even as he watched, the black shape began to turn slowly, falling back from the hurtling *Lucifer*. Only then could he see it fully. A cry of astonishment broke from the skipper as he recognized the thing for what it was. This Witch of the Pass was the gaunt and charred corpse of an ether-blasted, whose orbit lay round and round inside the Straits that had destroyed it. Like a mute, accusing ghost, the old ship was forever destined to haunt the narrow scene of its murder.

No wonder that for an instant he had half-believed the Straits bewitched! The sight outside wasn't very pleasant. Nor was it comforting to think that the *Lucifer* might yet join that lonely vigil. Captain Douglas turned from the plate and choked an angry oath back at the searing heat around him.

"Get Skelly," he snapped to Jackson; but the mate was clearly in no condition to obey. Pete Jackson still stood like a man who has looked into the inferno and is only awaiting the summons of a ghastly tap on the shoulder. Douglas scowled, blinked the sweat from his eyes, and started to exit himself. It didn't seem to make much difference, but he couldn't let the bo'sun perish like a caged rat.

However, he didn't leave the bridge. Something on the instrument panel gave Captain Douglas the sudden hope that he might be able to let Skelly stay where he was. The tempo-needle had halted its upward swing. The tiny arrow hovered motionless a hair's breadth from the hull melting-point; but it did not advance. As he watched it, the needle began to retreat, imperceptibly at first; then faster. Douglas jumped incredulously to the forward plate.

The twilighted expanse before the *Lucifer* was wide, frosty and marvelously clear. The mists had disappeared. They were through! The Captain's call brought mate Jackson up from his seat and all the way across the bridge in two jumps.

"Praise be!" Pete Jackson blinked joyfully into the sight. "It's a miracle—that's what it is!"

"A miracle, my big toe!" was Captain Douglas's very unskipperish retort. A thought which might explain the *Lucifer's* narrow escape from the fate of the charred ether-blasters, was forming in the skipper's mind. It was a thought which gained credence when Douglas quickly tested the contents of a vial in the bridge. The glass receptacle was filled with a sampling of the misty vapor in the Straits.

"Look at this," Douglas called the mate to him. Jackson peered at the results of the test, incredulously at first; then with an abject expression as he realized what it meant. Captain Douglas's further explanation did not make the little mate feel any happier.

"I just don't know what happened to me, Pete Jackson shook his head. First those infernal shrieks and then that old oxy-burner back there—" The mate broke off with a woeful, contrite look.

"I know, Pete," Douglas grinned with a mock shudder. "Seeing that old hulk had me believing in ghosts for a while myself.

Anyway, it's over and we're damned lucky. It's double rations all around at mess tonight. And I think we'll get Skelly out of the brig. He's probably so overcooked by now that he doesn't need any more punishing. Besides, I want to talk to him."

And Chris Douglas offered the mate a significant look which made Jackson brighten up considerably as he grinned back in understanding.

"SO you see, Skelly,"—several hours later Captain Douglas summed up the points of the simple but precise lecture in his cabin: "The myth of the Twin Witches can be altogether explained by the facts on hand now. The real danger in the Straits was—air. Plain dust-filled air. A wide column of it circulates about the Pass at better than gale velocity. That, and nothing else, accounts for the howling noises."

The *Lucifer's* skipper addressed his bo'sun in the presence of mate Jackson and a few other crew members. Tug Skelly's great face, as he listened, was the livid hue of broiled lobster. The heat in his little cell *had* been terrific. But no gleam of enlightenment lit the bo'sun's eyes as the Captain spoke. Tug's only reaction was a rather mistrustful frown.

"It's clear," Douglas went on carefully, "that the old ships that tried the Straits were charred instantly by the terrible friction set up when they struck the air. The same thing would have happened to us, if it hadn't been for the platinum on our hull."

Tug's face brightened with that; but his grin cost him such pain that he gulped hard and swallowed it down. In the little room, his swollen, flaming countenance flared like a great beacon.

"Sure, Cap'n," Tug nodded as he managed an imperceptible smile. "I told you we'd get through all right if yuh left it to me."

"Now, listen," Douglas said a trifle testily, "the platinum didn't do a thing but insulate our hull from the heat. Don't you see? It was just enough to keep the plates from melting. Platinum can't be oxidized—it can't be burnt! And that's what saved our lives. You see it now, don't you, Skelly?"

"Yessir, Cap'n," Tug frowned. "I get

what you're drivin' at." The big bo'sun did seem to be making an effort to understand the simple mechanics that underlay their escape. And that, Captain Douglas felt, was a momentous step in the right direction.

"Good!" Captain Christopher Douglas said with feeling. He relaxed and looked about him with a pleased smile. Another convert had been led from darkness into the light of truth and science. It was not every day that Chris Douglas was privileged to rescue some poor, superstition-ridden soul. A sense of warm beneficence filled the young skipper. But he had another reason, besides the fact that the *Lucifer* was now certain to fetch New York on schedule, to congratulate himself.

"I've got good news for you, Skelly," Douglas smiled; "you'll be glad to learn that the platinum you used on the hull was caked by the heat; and it is almost a hundred-percent recoverable."

"That's jes' fine!" Tug said with much relief. "I was sort of worried about that."

"Yes," Douglas went on pointedly but not unkindly, "and since it was your boner in Orion City that got us into the mess in the first place, I have decided, Skelly, that you're going to do the recovering, by yourself! However, once the platinum is back in the hold we'll call all accounts square. How is that?"

"Me, Cap'n? Myself?" Tug's singed eyebrows went up in surprised disappointment. It was clear the bo'sun had expected a different kind of reward for the part he played in traversing the dread Pass. Tug scratched his head wryly. "It's OK I guess," he sighed.

"You've got three days," Douglas said, "before we arrive in New York to do the

job. That's providing you start at once. I think you'd better get your bulger and go out on the hull right now—unless—" the Captain smiled a little—"unless you're still afraid of those witches, Skelly."

The Captain bantered easily. The light of science brightened every corner of the cabin now. The darkness was a thing of the past. It was impossible even to think of witches without snickering. However, the painful grin on Tug Skelly's face was hardly a snicker; rather it was a sly and knowing grin.

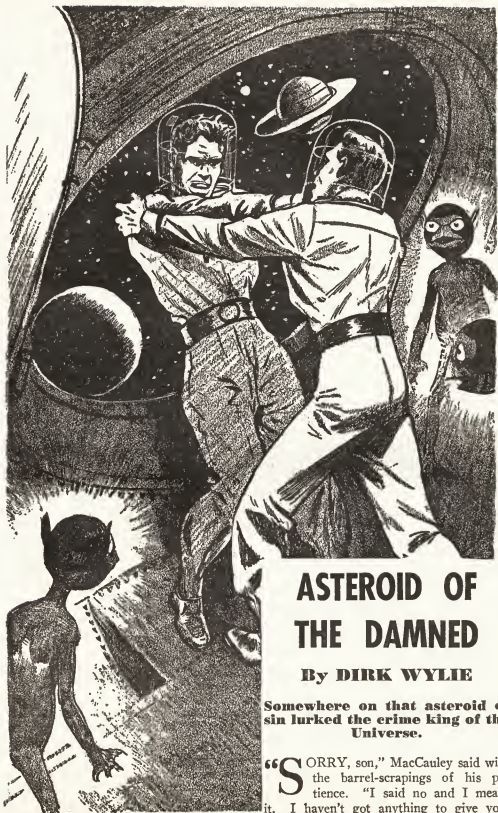
"No sir! Cap'n," Tug scoffed heavily. "Not me! I never was afraid o' those witches on account of myself—it was the rest of the crew I was thinkin' about all along! Yessir. Y'see, I had *this* all the time, Cap'n."

Tug drew from his huge bosom a tiny, bedraggled object that hung by a cord from his neck. With some pride, he exhibited his possession to Captain Douglas who stared puzzledly at the little, shapeless thing. But before Douglas could examine it, the bo'sun tucked it back inside his shirt and saluted with as much vigor as his parboiled frame would allow.

"Yessir!" Tug Skelly announced confidently. "I'll have that platinum back in the hold before morning mess."

It wasn't until the group had followed Tug Skelly out of the cabin, leaving him alone, that Captain Douglas realized what the bo'sun had held up in his gnarled palm. The realization made the young skipper sigh heavily and sink back into his seat. The victory of science over bo'sun Tug Skelly was not destined to be an easy one. Tug was going bravely out onto the *Lucifer's* hull armed with an old and much-used—rabbit's foot!

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ASTEROID OF THE DAMNED

By DIRK WYLIE

Somewhere on that asteroid of sin lurked the crime king of the Universe.

"S ORRY, son," MacCauley said with the barrel-scrappings of his patience. "I said no and I meant it. I haven't got anything to give you.

Now please stop wagging at me and go."

The excited glitter of the Palladian's luminiferous eyes died dispiritedly. MacCauley turned his back on the slight-bodied asterite and rapped his thumbnail against his drained glass. The bartender, a heavy and humorous man, expertly refilled Mac's glass with oily, musky, milk-white synthetic liquor and said: "This Kiddie bothering you? Scat, you, or I'll see that you never get into this place again."

Mac shrugged as he watched the strippling strain to catch the bartender's meaning by reading his lips, then mournfully disappear. "No more than they all do," he answered. "What's the matter with them, anyhow? They're positively nutty on the subject of money."

The bartender shook his head and snatched a quick drag on a smoldering cigar-stub. Replacing it on a ledge, he said: "Not money so much. You couldn't bribe a Kiddie with a certified check for a couple of billion dollars. They're not bright, exactly; they don't regard paper as worth anything. It's metal they want. If it happens to be precious, that's all right, but any kind of metal will do. What they're really crazy about, of course, is silver and copper. They'll do just about anything for it, including murder and treason."

Mac, listening too intently, gulped a bit more of his drink than even his spaceman's gullet could take. When the red-hot lava stopped strangling him and he could see once more through the streaming fountains that had been his eyes, he managed to choke out: "What do they want it for? Do they eat it?"

The bartender laughed. "Nah. They don't really eat anything. They drink some kind of stuff they find in the rocks—like they used to find petroleum, on Earth. Radioactive, this stuff is. That's all they need to live on. They don't breathe at all. You can see that; they don't even have a mouth or a real nose, just a sort of trunk that they drink through. . . . Wait a minute. Be back."

The bartender rolled away. A couple of new customers had come into his side of the bar and were demanding attention.

Mac sighed and glanced at his watch. But the bartender was back and ready for more talk before Mac had made up his

mind to leave. The bartender wanted to talk because this was a dull night in the cafe attached to Pallas' largest gambling-room; for the same reason, MacCauley wanted to leave. He was here on business.

HOWEVER, he might need to know something about the natives of Pallas for his business. And he really was shockingly uninformed about the creatures who inhabited the free-port asteroid. Other than that they were called Kiddies, looked like seven-year-old Earthly children, and didn't breathe, he really knew nothing.

"Then what do they do with this metal if they don't eat it?" he asked.

The bartender shrugged. "They probably know, but they're too dopey to be able to tell you. I asked one of them once—he wrote out an answer, the way they always do when they want to tell you something. Seems they generate electricity in their bodies. A Palladian's idea of a real good time is to take a hunk of pure copper and hold it in his hands. The current runs from one hand to the other. They are like that. This one claimed that each metal gave them a different kind of thrill."

"All right if you like," MacCauley said absently. "Me, I'll take my jolts out of a bottle."

"Was that an order for another drink?" The bottle was already in the fat man's hands.

MacCauley nodded, and glanced again at the time. He swallowed the poisonous liquor as fast as he could manage; then took one last quick look around the bar to make sure.

Yep, he was wasting time here. The place was practically empty.

He paid his check in Earth-American dollars, and passed on to the main game room.

Like everything else in Pallas, it was completely underground, with a purely artificial atmosphere. Artificial, in fact, was the word for Pallas. Everything about it was synthetic; there wasn't a figment of reality to be found in it. All that Pallas had to offer visitors was freedom from most of the more pressing laws of the more civilized—and larger—worlds. That, and the Kiddies, the peculiar race that had been found on the small asteroid when the

first space-explorers got there. Everything that Pallas had, it owed to the fact that, in essence, it had nothing. No minerals worth the cost of extraction; no agriculture; no science; no artifacts; no history. It was so totally useless that the major worlds of the system had declared, "Hands off!" And to that fact Pallas owed the liberality of laws that made it a refuge for fugitives from the Tri-Planet justice, as well as a planet-sized gambling den.

MacCauley curled the tip of his nose when he got a whiff of the atmosphere. It had been bad enough in the bar—thin, moist air, representing a compromise between the atmospheres of Earth, Mars and Venus; enjoyable to the members of none of the races from those planets, but just barely breathable to all. That atmosphere, even when pure, was obnoxious. And here, in the densely-packed main hall, it was really foul. There was something about Venusians, Mac decided, that he didn't like. It wasn't their fault, of course, that they had evolved in a wet climate, and had distinct auras of unearthly B. O. in consequence of their need to perspire. But it wasn't his fault, either, and he didn't see why he should suffer for it.

MENTALLY holding his nostrils, he waded into the reek and halted by a magneto-roulette table. A casual observer, MacCauley hoped, would think he was engrossed in watching the game. Actually he was carefully scrutinizing each of the score of players and spectators at the table. Somewhere in this motley mob made of the dwellers of a half-dozen planets there might be a cool, level-headed, thoroughly dangerous man, the brains of the syndicate that was flooding Earth and Venus with narcophene. That drug was the most formidable in the history of narcotics. You chewed it—if you were insane or ignorant!—and you felt nothing but a pleasant coolness on your tongue. There weren't any mad hallucinations of grandeur; you never lost consciousness of what you were doing or who you were. Just, without your consciously realizing it, you felt better all around. Things that should have worried you sick seemed trivial; you could laugh at the specter of sickness or agony or anything, however fear-

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some that endangered or injured you. The drug had a certain medical value; it was used to prevent total insanity in persons suffering from utterly incurable and horribly painful diseases. For with them it didn't matter that the narcophene habit was permanent, once acquired; they didn't have to fear the mental and moral and eventually physical collapse that was bound to come. They were as good as dead anyhow.

But for others, . . .

And the man who had reorganized the once-smashed industry of manufacturing and smuggling it was on Pallas now. That much the home office of TriPlanet Law knew, and had told Mac. That was all their best operatives on the inner planets had been able to dig up, and from that point onward . . . nothing. Those who could have told more were addicts, and those who had tried to tell more were dead. Murdered.

There was a TPL office on Pallas, of course, but it was a one-man outfit. And the one man seemed thoroughly incompetent, for this job, at least. His reports had shown him to be unable to even begin the job of tracking down the man. Hence, MacCauley.

For the sake of appearances, MacCauley threw a bill on number 28, lost it, and moved on. Nobody in the neighborhood of that table corresponded to the vague physical description he'd been able to glean from the scanty reports.

Nor, he found, did anyone in the house. That didn't prove anything, of course, except that the man Mac was after wasn't at this particular place at the time; or, naturally, that the description MacCauley'd been given was wrong from the ground up, but that wasn't a thing to think about.

He shrugged and moved toward the exit. The room was packed worse than ever; he had to shove his way through. He kept bumping into people, he noticed—then looked around. It wasn't so much that he was bumping into people, he found, as that people, represented by the Kiddie, were nudging him.

"Oh, for the Lord's sake!" he cried tiredly. "I tell you I won't give you anything. Now get away from me. And stay away, if you want to keep living."

The Kiddie shrank into himself and

seemed to whimper voicelessly. The glow-glands set around his eyes shone a pinkish purple of fright. He started to say something—in the primitive sign-language that his race used to communicate with aliens—but halted the gesture and abruptly turned and slunk away. His slight frame, the size and appearance of a seven-year-old boy's, vanished almost immediately in the pack of hulking Venusians and attenuated, pallid stick-men from Mars.

MacCauley didn't pursue him; there was no reason, of course, for him to do so.

BUT that, "of course," like so many others, was wrong. There was a definite reason for Mac to follow the metals-mad asterite. Mac found the reason when he reached the cloakroom. He reached in his pocket to tip the pretty Terrestrial check-girl—and found not even a pocket. Just a slit that had been made not more than ten minutes before, through which the pocket itself and contents had been neatly extracted. Presumably by the Kiddie.

"Damn!" was the best Mac could do, but he said it with feeling. He was casting about in his mind for something he could say to the girl that might make her forget about tips when he saw the Kiddie himself, luminescing a vivid green, scuttling out the front door.

"Hey!" he yelled, and it wasn't only a desire to get away that kept the Kiddie from looking around; he couldn't hear any more than he could speak. Language failing, Mac took stronger measures. He left his sport-silk jacket on the arm of the bewildered girl and sprinted after the Kiddie. Intercepting him just previous to the door, he swung the Palladian around and gestured with frantic anger. The Kiddie, with a surprising show of strength in so frail a body, attempted no answer or denial of the charge of theft, but wrenched himself free and darted out the door.

Mac, following, met the inevitable. When the luck of the MacCauleys ran bad, it stayed bad—or worse. He collided with a fat and pugnacious drunk. Not only collided with him but knocked the wind out of him. If it hadn't been that the drunk had an equally drunk and volatile companion, that would have been all right.

As it was, Mac found himself on the receiving end of a pale, knuckly Venusian fist.

He was flat on the floor before he realized he'd been hit. Then began the real trouble.

Somebody yelled, "Oh, boy! A fight!" and leaped joyously on Mac with a pair of magno-caulked spaceman's boots. What happened after that got worse and worse. Everybody in the gambling joint seemed to have mayhem in their hearts. Practically to a man, they poured out and joined in the free-for-all. Half the floating population of Pallas seemed to have come to rest on MacCauley's solar plexus by the time he heard the soft, popping noises from the weapons of the house's private army of bouncers and trouble-shooters. When MacCauley next found himself able to look around he was out in the half-hearted illumination of the street, sick and weak from the effect of the gas pellets which had quelled the riot.

And without a penny to his name.

IT would have been foolhardy to have left his money in the "safe" at the hotel, though there was slight comfort in that thought. One place was as good as another on Pallas, where laws were made for the sheer pleasure of violating them; the native Palladians, shifty and unmoral as they were, were hopelessly outclassed in dishonesty by the civilized men of the inner planets. The one law all respected was the law of pure and applied force.

Mac fumbled a crumpled cigarette from his pocket and thought miserably of going to the police. Miserably, because the native police force was a joke and a mockery, maintained more to put the squeeze on innocent foreigners than for any other reason. Which shows how naive the asterites were; there was nothing innocent about most of the foreigners that came to the tiny planet.

Even the TPL post on the asteroid was powerless, shackled by diplomatic necessities to the pretence that the thick-witted Palladians were capable of running their own world. "Hands off!" was the watchword.

His swollen eyes squinting at the fluoro-flame lamps set in the rocky ceiling of the tunneled street, MacCauley sighed heav-

ily, feeling the full weight of his predicament.

All his money had been on him. All that was left of his money was a memory and a neat little slit just under the zip-seal flap of his hip pocket. And on Pallas, where it was dog eat dog and the devil help the one who lacked a full set of teeth, money was the means of obtaining dental attention.

Yes, Mac was in a mess, for all his kit, including the last can of Terrestrial cigarettes, were in the hotel room; even his blasters, the slim, wicked pistols that projected a vibratory pencil-beam that destroyed flesh and neural fibers and left the brain watery pulp, were locked up in that dark little rat-hole up near the top of Pallas' single, buried city. Mac was weaponless, except for a tempered bronze knife in his shirt, on an outlaw world where a swift attack was the best insurance against sudden death.

His hotel bill was payable every twenty-four hours, and his period of grace had expired. Pallas being first and foremost a gambling planet, it wasn't at all uncommon for a man to check into the best suite a hotel could offer, his money-belt fat and heavy with a half-million in platinum credits; leave in the early afternoon for a little fling at the tables, and come back in the evening asking apologetically if he might borrow the price of a shave so he could look nice on the trip back home.

For that was the rule: no money, out you go and your baggage held by right of a lockout. Everything on Pallas was operated by the same ruling—cash strictly in advance. And to make sure that no floaters were left to the dubious charity of the planetoid, there was another standing rule. A law, this time; a duly enacted law of the Palladian legislature and the sole ordinance that was enforced by the foreign-sponsored native authorities.

Before a visitor was admitted to Pallas, he was first made to post a bond equal to his passage back home. And that could not be touched or refunded until he left.

MacCauley groaned aloud and looked about him. Walking blindly and without thinking, very easy in the light gravity of low-powered magna-gravs, he had entered a part of the sealed city new to him.

HE was in the native quarter, at the planetoid's core, where the asterites were as thick as red dust on Mars—and for the first time Mac saw a Kiddie policeman. He was wearing no more clothing than the rest of his kind, just carried a staff of office, like the old Bow Street Runners.

An idea suddenly made contact in MacCauley's mind. He signaled the officer and dragged out a notebook and pencil, unnecessarily, as it happened. The Kiddie, in sinuous gestures, signified that he could understand English, partly by lip-reading, partly by picking up the sound in some weird fashion through rock-conduction and the sensitive soles of his splay feet.

Mac, enunciating carefully, spoke.

"One of your people has robbed me. I want him arrested. Where do I go?"

The Kiddie bobbed his head, and from the manner in which his luminiferous glands sparkled balefully, it was evident where he thought MacCauley should go. Nevertheless, he snapped out *his* little pad and stylus, and scrawled: "Commi wih me tu Offic he wil arrange arest."

MacCauley deciphered the scribble. He shrugged and said, "Okay. Hop to it, sonny." He walked beside the diminutive policeman for a few hundred feet, glancing incuriously at the small burrows which pierced the rock walls and kicking away chunks of the queer, spongy rock on which the Kiddies subsisted, the equivalent of Earthly garbage.

He should have thought of the cops before, he realized. The Kiddies, as a race, were not numerous, and he could probably bully them into finding the thief and recovering his money. After all, why not?

He soon found out. The lolling half-breed Venusian interpreter who loafed around the ratty, worm-infested police station heard his complaint and deftly translated it for the benefit of a moth-eaten Kiddie who seemed to be as much in charge here as anyone else. MacCauley drew an easy breath, his first in two hours, and then—

The interpreter sing-songed, "Forty Earth-dollars, please. Filing fee."

MacCauley's eyes narrowed. The old squeeze play. "Don't be a sap," he said flatly, his thin lips tight against his teeth.

"I haven't got forty cents. That little louse took everything that was in my pocket."

The Venusian smirked, and regarded his greenish, webbed hand with great interest. "That is very bad, my friend," he said, and flicked a flea from a fold in the skin of his wrinkled wrist. "Here on Pallas we have a law; the citizens must be protected. When a foreigner makes an accusation against a citizen, it is quite possible that he is wrong, and a great injustice will have been done. As you know, there is only one way to soothe a Palladian . . . money."

MacCauley cursed bitterly, harsh, biting oaths. "All right," he said then, forcing his tone to evenness. "I'll sign a guarantee of the money. When you catch this pickpocket, you'll reclaim the money; then I'll put up the bond pending trial."

By great effort the interpreter managed to look shocked. "That is absurd. You must pay now; if the Palladian is innocent, he will not have the money. No, it is impossible."

"If he's innocent it'll be because you caught the wrong guy. Why, by all the Plutonian Ice Devils, should I have to pay for your mistake?"

The green-skinned man smirked again. "It is the law. The law is very strict. If you do not like it, you can go back to the planet you came from." And he turned away, busying himself with some important-looking papers, dusty and much-handled. MacCauley was not too preoccupied to note that the blubbery Venusian was holding them upside-down:

MacCauley socked his balled fist into his palm and wondered if pacing the littered floor would help. He was now, he assured himself, in the worst of all fixes. The time he'd been trapped between two hostile groups of Mercurians who were settling a private argument with quarter-mile lightning bolts was a pleasure compared to this. Then he'd had his guns, at least, and no restrictions about using them.

He had to have his kit. Which meant getting his money back. It was necessary, he decided, to play his trump card. He hadn't wanted to reveal himself as a free-lancing TPL man; word would be sure to leak out. But he certainly couldn't accom-

plish anything otherwise; the chance of recovering the credits, and eventually his *matériel*, was nil without some sort of aid. And that was what he could get only by showing these small-time constables that he was Mr. Law himself. It may be also that he was motivated by justifiable conceit in TPL itself.

"Okay," he snapped suddenly, startling the pudgy hybrid with the sharpness of his voice. "I guess there's no point in keeping under wraps any longer. Let me tell you who I am. . . ."

TWENTY minutes later, as he stumbled out of the warped stone building, he was wondering dazedly why his TPL affiliation had done him no good.

Tri-Planet Law was an organization that had considerable history, nor could all of it be written. It was the most potent single force in the history of any planet of the Solar System, figured any way you like. It was the only force whose rule was hardly ever challenged.

When you broke the law within the territories mandated by TPL, you did so with the very greatest caution. And you never tried to fight back if you were caught. It wasn't really a large organization, relative to the vast throngs of intelligent life that swarmed the System. It was only a tiny decimal of one per cent of the entire population of the thirty inhabited globes. But when you consider that the total census showed more than a hundred billion individuals of high enough brain-power to be rated sentient, you can understand that a fraction of a per cent does mean close to a hundred and thirty thousand persons united into the best-organized police and military force that a hundred trained social technicians could evolve.

That is why MacCauley couldn't understand the fact that the half-breed interpreter had practically laughed in his face.

True, TPL's hundred and thirty thousand of personnel were largely on the planets of Earth, Mars and Venus, plus their possessions and allied states. TPL had no standing here, officially, but the organization had a *de facto* reign over all of space by virtue of the fastest and best-armed space-ships made. And Pallas, dependent upon the transient trade, certainly shouldn't be able to afford to anger a rep-

representative of the body that ruled the space-lanes.

Something, Mac decided, was thoroughly rotten in the local checking office of TPL. Something that might show why the operative on Pallas hadn't begun to be able to find the man or men behind the narcophene racket.

MacCauley hadn't shown himself there before because he didn't want himself identified with the Law group. Now that he'd uselessly exposed himself, that obstacle was nullified.

He'd found out where the place was just so he could avoid it. Pausing a second to puzzle out its probable direction, he started off.

It was close, of course; nothing was far from anything on Pallas. Within five minutes he was standing outside the building, rubbing his chin and deciding that he could stand a wash-up before going in.

Like most of the asteroid's structures, this one seemed to have been made by a blind moron for his elder brother's fifth birthday. Stepping gingerly to avoid bringing the ceiling down about his ears, he made for the washroom.

The Kiddie attendant was scrunched up in a corner, luminescing happily over a former air-lock handle. "Hey!" Mac said uselessly. A wadded paper towel brought better results, and the Kiddie glanced up.

Of course, it had to be the Kiddie who lifted Mac's roll. The gods of chance saw to that. In a trice Mac had backed the frightened Kiddie into a corner, looking rather threatening what with his grim expression and the bronze knife suddenly sprouting from his fist. He was fumbling for the gesture that would convey, "Gimme!" to the asterite when the interruption came.

"Having fun?"

Mac dropped the Kiddie and spun around, automatically reaching for a blaster that wasn't there. "Who the devil are you?" he snarled.

The long Terrestrial newcomer leaned gingerly on a soot-covered washstand and frowned. "Me? I work near here. Who are you?" He stuck a cigarette in his taut lips, pinched the tip and inhaled sharply as it flared blue.

Something clicked in MacCauley's memory. Remembrances of long rows of files,

photographs. . . . The TPL agent for Pallas. He said, "You're Kittrell, right?"

The long man nodded. "I might be," he said, "if you're somebody that's got a right to know. So what?" He hadn't moved but his posture seemed subtly altered, caution in every line of his frame. From the position of his hands, Mac more than suspected he was armed.

Easing his hands behind his back, he twisted the stem of his wristwatch. Kittrell jumped. "Hey!" he exclaimed. Sparks were fairly snapping from the blazing dial of his own heavy, old-fashioned timepiece—the recognition signal of TPL operatives. "I guess I am Kittrell," the man acknowledged. "They told me they were sending someone from the Narcotics division to take over on that narcophene business. You him?"

"Yeah. Right now I'm having trouble of my own, though. This Kiddie rolled me last night. Every cent I had; I can't even get back to my hotel."

"Rolled you?" Kittrell's eyes widened. "I know this fella. He cleans up around the office. Wait a minute." His thin, pale hands flashed in intricate motions, meaningless to Mac. They were significant to the Kiddie, though, for he replied as rapidly. Kittrell nodded. "I wouldn't have thought it of him. Always thought he was too stupid to rob anybody over ten."

That was a pretty dubious remark, Mac thought, but he ignored it. "Do you suppose you can make him cough up?"

"Sure!" The other smiled cheerfully. "Like this!"

MAC was unprepared for the next move. Kittrell pulled his punch, of course, because he didn't want to kill the frail Palladian, but his heavy fist bounced the Kiddie off the floor and flung him to the base of the wall. He lay there, his glow-glands jetting crimson beams of fear and rage.

"Hey!" cried MacCauley. "Don't murder the poor son! That's no way to get my dough back!"

Kittrell stared. Then a shadow passed over his face and he seemed to lose interest. He shrugged. "Have it your way. What do you want me to do—adopt him?"

"Ask him what he did with the money.

Tell him he can have the metal stuff; all I want back is the bills."

Kittrell, looking disgusted, semaphored the message. Kiddie faces don't react as a human's does, but MacCauley was pretty sure there was gratitude glowing on this one's knobby features. After a couple of seconds' gesticulation, Kittrell looked around. "He says he's sorry he took it. If you come with him he'll give you the money. He's got it stashed away in the sty he lives in, a little farther along this corridor."

"Will he do it?"

Kittrell shrugged again. "Guess so. Anyway, you're bigger than him—or don't you like rough stuff?"

That, MacCauley thought, was hardly a friendly remark. He resolved to take it up later; after all, it wasn't his fault that he was superseding Kittrell. There really was no cause for jealousy in the long man. "Coming?" Mac asked.

Kittrell shook his head. "Got to go back to the office for a minute. I'll drop around in about ten minutes, though."

"Okay," said Mac, satisfied, and went out behind the Kiddie.

The Kiddie's dwelling was ugly and cluttered, but moderately clean.

The little asterite, with somewhat the attitude of a man who expects a poke in the face, gestured to Mac to be seated on a hassock-like affair. MacCauley rumbled: "Sure I'll sit down. I'll stay right here until I get my dough back."

The Kiddie seemed to shrug resignedly; probably he just gave that impression from his general demeanor. He slipped away into another room. Mac just had time to think of the possibility that the Kiddie had made a getaway when he was back again, holding MacCauley's billfold.

Mac counted it swiftly. "Where's the rest of it?" he grunted. The bills were there, but there had been about two dollars in change—gone now.

The Kiddie looked scared but shook his head. "Won't tell me, huh?" Mac blustered. "How would you like to be put away for robbery? I swore out a complaint against you today; if I turn you over, it'll be a long time before you get out."

The Kiddie looked more frightened than ever; he was practically trembling. Mac

was encouraged, but surprised by the reaction to his threat—it shouldn't have been so great. He lived to regret the fact that he didn't find out just why the Kiddie was so affected by the threat of imprisonment.

"All right," he went on. "Suppose I let you keep the metal. Suppose I pay you well, get you lots more. Gold and silver dollars. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

From the Palladian's sudden attitude of dog-like devotion, it was more than clear that he would.

"Okay," Mac said. "I'll pay you one hundred dollars in silver quarters, if—"

The Kiddie was ablaze with interest. Not taking his eyes off Mac, he scuttled crab-wise over to a tablette, snatched up a notebook and scrawled: "Il do anythin wat do yu wan."

Mac grinned. "Fine. Listen carefully now. I'm looking for an Earthman. He's somewhere on this planet, but I wouldn't know him if I saw him. He is about two inches taller than me; weighs maybe two hundred pounds—a little fatter than I am. He's blind, practically, in one eye. That's all I can tell you, because those are the only things he can't disguise.

THE Kiddie seemed suddenly reluctant, but was persuaded by a gesture of Mac's—a gesture that cost him dear, as it turned out.

"Here," he said, to seal the bargain. "Here's an advance for you." Dexterously he flipped his knife from some recess of his shirt and presented it to the Kiddie.

Ecstasy was clearly shown by that Kiddie. His glow-glands fairly spat large orange sparks of joy. The tempered bronze—it was made of that metal only to avoid magnetic spotters—wasn't much good for cutting, but it certainly was a conductor of electricity.

"Well?" MacCauley said, growing impatient. He tapped the engrossed Kiddie and repeated the question. The asterite bobbed his head and pressed a stud on his pad. The writing vanished, and he was scribbling again.

"Hello there!" boomed a new voice from the doorway. "What's going on?"

MacCauley whirled. Kittrell was standing there, beaming broadly. "Hi," Mac

said. "We were wondering— Hey! What the hell!"

Kittrell's eyes had narrowed and a snarl flashed out on his face. With the fastest draw MacCauley had ever seen, he snapped out his gun and blasted—

Not MacCauley. There was a stomach-squeezing hiss of sizzling flesh behind Mac. He spun again, to see the Kiddie, his shoulder and half his neck gone, slumped to the floor.

Mac knelt swiftly beside him. Dead as a Ganymedan Secessionist. "Now what the hell did you do that for?" Mac demanded. "I was on the trail of something hot." He stared at the pad and stylus that had dropped from the dead asterite's limp hand.

"I kni the man yu wan he is th." That was all it said.

"That's a big help," said MacCauley, confronting the other man, who was strangely tense. He thrust the tablet at him. "Now what do I do?"

Kittrell scanned it briefly, and relaxed a bit. "It looked bad to me," he explained. "There was that damned Kiddie with a knife in his hand. He had it up to throw at you—or me. Can't take chances."

Mac sighed, resigning himself to continued hard luck. "We all make mistakes, I guess," he said. Then, hardening: "But you've made your last boner on this case. From now on stay the hell away from me. I don't like you and I don't like the way you do things." He moved toward the door. Kittrell, lounging across it, obstructed his path—just enough to stop him.

"Where're you going?" the bigger man asked.

"To report this," Mac snapped. "You'll get out of it all right."

"Don't report it."

"Why not?"

Kittrell grimaced distastefully. "Too much red tape. What the devil, who'll know we were here?"

Mac snorted and filled his lungs preparatory to telling Kittrell just what he thought of him. There was a sweetish, balsam-like taste to the air, like the smell of a fir forest.

Or like the smell of narcophene.

He had picked up the knife; still had it in his hands. While he was still figur-

ing things out, his hand swept up with the knife still in it, pressed against Kittrell's abdomen. Kittrell's draw had been fast. Maybe he was naturally gun-slick—fast enough, maybe, for a lightning draw like that to be natural to him. Maybe he was, but maybe he was just burning up the years of his life twice as fast as normal under the influence of the drug.

"If you don't want your gut slit, Kittrell, keep your hands where they are!" Mac grated, his voice suddenly gone flat and hard.

Kittrell's hand had fluttered toward his shoulder holster; it stopped as Mac spoke.

"I don't know whether you're really Kittrell or not—probably you are," Mac muttered. "But if you're in TPL now, you'll be out pretty soon. As soon as I tell them you're a hophead."

Kittrell's face had gone white. Other than that there was no change as his bleak eyes bored steadily into MacCauley's. "What are you talking about?" he said evenly. "Take that thing out of my stomach."

"Oh, no!" Mac shook his head decisively. "You killed one of my witnesses; you'll take his place. You're going to tell me how to find the guy that sells you the narcophene."

"Sorry," said Kittrell, tautening still more, "but I can't." At the last possible second his eyes flicked behind and over Mac's shoulder.

The thing that hit MacCauley on the back of the neck first didn't quite knock him out. He was stunned, but in the half-second before the next blow jolted him into complete darkness, he heard Kittrell conclude, most casually: "You see, I am the guy who sells the narcophene."

A SHIVER rippled along Mac's spine, and another one. That was his first waking impression. He was cold, frozen stiff, he decided next, when his limbs failed to react to the stimuli of his neural commands. As the fog cleared away from his aching head he discovered that his hands were tightly bound behind him, hobbles on his feet to keep him from walking far or fast.

Not that he could have gone anywhere much. He was in a bare little metal room, lying on the grating that supplanted decks

in most modern spacers. Not much point in getting up, he realized, and merely hitched himself into a more comfortable position in a corner, moving as well as he could under the unaccustomed drag of full Earth gravity.

He was in the lock-room, the chamber before an airlock. He felt vaguely unhappy. Whatever was coming, he was sure he wouldn't like it.

Behind him a heavy door eased open. Boots thumped hollowly on the grids and a familiar voice sounded, echoing from the bare metal walls. "Hello, MacCauley. How's the head?"

"Go to hell," Mac suggested. He craned his neck and stared full into Kittrell's face. There was a curious mixture of emotions there; faint sorrow, an unpleasant sort of crooked leer, and an air of boredom—each was visible. Kittrell shrugged.

"I guess you know what you're up against?"

"Sure." MacCauley tried to shrug, too, but succeeded only in tearing a patch of skin from his wrists where the wire bonds were tightest. "You're going to shove me out."

"I'm afraid so. Believe me, I'd rather not. I think you're a good chap; once I wanted to be like you—loyal to the service. They stuck me out here and made a desk clerk of me, when I would have given my arm to do some real work. I got a good salary; there was prestige enough whenever I could get back to Boston and show off. It was a good job, in a way. But there was nothing to do. Then I intercepted a load of narcophene. Like everybody else, I thought I could beat it. I didn't. I tried it and couldn't stop."

He stopped abruptly and scanned MacCauley's face through narrowed eyes. "You see how it is?" he questioned.

MacCauley tried to stall for time. Tensing his chest muscles against the bruises, he said, "Give me a cigarette, Kittrell? That's the usual privilege of the condemned man." The lunatic obligingly popped a brown-paper cylinder between his lips, squeezed the tip to light it. Mac suddenly heard more footsteps, lighter ones but many of them. "What's that?"

"Just my Kiddies," the dope peddler explained, as a dozen of them trotted into the room and ranged themselves, immobile,

along the walls. "They've never seen an air-breather—that's you—in empty space, and they don't believe it will be fatal. You don't mind if they watch, do you?"

Mac could hold it in no longer. "Kittrell," he blurted, "you're crazy as a coot!"

Kittrell, wading through Kiddies whose faces shone an excited red, turned a surprised stare. "I've been afraid of that," he said worriedly over his shoulder. His long fingers pressed a stud by the 'lock, and the inner valve whined open. "You see, that's the trouble with narcophene. You know what's happening to you, but you just don't give a damn. God, it's cold in this 'lock!"

He stood there, one foot on the coaming of the 'lock, peering around the dark, icy chamber. The lawman braced his back to the wall, shoved up. "It's a hell of a death, Kittrell," he said, his voice strained.

Kittrell replied dreamily. "Is it? I don't know. It isn't bad. It's clean, at least, and the worms don't get you." Absently he fended off the crew of impatient, crowding Kiddies. He stared silently into nothingness, for a long minute.

MAC CAULEY found he could reach his pocket, and his heart tried to impale itself on his palate. Eagerly he tore more flesh from his raw wrists, strained his fingers to plumb the depths of the pocket. A weapon—anything.

And his fingers found nothing. He remembered; that this was the pocket the dead asterite had picked; nothing there but a slit.

On the automatic return trip, his fingers, numbed by disheartenment, sent a message to his brain; a message of cold. He disregarded it for a split second.

Then, just as Kittrell was opening his mouth to speak, the correct interpretation of that coolness penetrated Mac's consciousness. Desperately he fumbled at the thing that was woven to his broad belt: wrenched at it with every atom of strength at his command. It came free; he twisted suddenly and something metallic jingled musically in the far corner of the 'lock, sending vibrations through the grid flooring to be picked up by the Palladians. The jingle of metal—and the Kiddies loved metal insanely!

"Money!" roared MacCauley. And, "Money! In the 'lock! Copper—metal! Go get it!"

Kittrell vanished, washed into the airlock by an overflowing wave of Palladians. Hands fumbling desperately behind him for the control switch—where was it!—Mac cursed his stiff, ineffectual fingers and his inability to see behind his back. He touched a switch—no, not that one!—and another, jabbed at it. Motors hummed softly, the scrambling noise died away as the inner door swung shut—so slowly!—and then for a second the only sound in the chamber was the harsh sobbing of Mac's breath as he slumped weakly against the chill metal wall.

Until that semi-silence was broken by the descending siren-scream of the outer door's opening, abruptly terminating in a *whoosh* as the last molecules of air tore into the vacuum without, dragging with irresistible force at the chunks of matter, living and dead, that tried to obstruct its passage. . . .

"AND that's the story." MacCauley turned away from the recorder. "Here's the notebook I found among Kittrell's things." He flipped a thin, black pad at the major. "I think you'll be able to break the code easily enough, as there are enough names known for you to work on. It seems to include his whole organization."

Major Copeland glanced at the cabalistic signs incuriously, then ticketed the book and slipped it into a pneumatic tube.

"What bothers me," he complained, "is why Kittrell didn't claw his way out of the 'lock. Sounds to me as though he had plenty of time."

Mac gestured inquiringly at his superior, received a nod, and with a sigh unclipped his Sam Browne. "Kittrell? Probably stumbled and slammed his head against a rivet." He stood up suddenly, savagely snubbed out a freshly lit cigarette. "Oh, hell! I'll tell you what I really think, Major—I don't believe Kittrell tried to get out of there. I don't think he cared, and I haven't forgotten what he said about dying that way."

"Could be," Copeland agreed. "And

what did you say that stuff was that saved your life?"

Mac smiled. "Money, of a sort. You know where I was stationed last year?"

"Some place on Earth, wasn't it?"

MacCauley nodded. "China. Got to know some of the people there. Got kind of chummy with one of them; she gave me a present when I left, as a keepsake. A string of what they call "cash." It's a kind of money they used to use; square pieces of copper with holes in the middle. Had 'em strung together and sewn onto a belt. Well, you know how Palladians feel about copper." His eyes crinkled again. "That was a pretty good keepsake—not worth much, but it bought my life."

Both men were silent for a while. Then, "What are your plans now, MacCauley? I've recommended you for promotion, to fill Kittrell's job on Pallas. You'll get a higher rating, more pay—and all the time in the world to yourself."

MacCauley shook his head. "Sorry, Major," he said, "But that's not what I want. My plans are extra-special. Say," he went on, sitting down and staring earnestly at Copeland, "have you ever heard the story of how Manhattan Island—that's part of New York City—was bought from the ancient Indians? Twenty-four dollars' worth of junk beads—that's what they paid the Indians for it. Now the land is worth billions of dollars—a square foot of it brings the best part of a million."

"So?" The major was interested but lacked comprehension. "What's that got to do with your resignation?"

MacCauley smiled. "A lot," he answered. "Did it ever occur to you that intelligent salesmanship can do wonders? And did you ever think of the possibilities that you could realize on Pallas with—say—a couple of dozen thousand dollars' worth of copper and other metal junk?"

The major looked startled. "No—not till now," he added, understanding dawning. "And what you're going to do is—?"

"What I'm going to do," MacCauley beamed, "is convert reward money into junk. And then, Major, I'll begin to convert the junk—into a kingdom. I'm going to buy up a world—a wide-open world—with a boatload of scrap metal!"



THE STAR-MASTER

By RAY CUMMINGS

Docile, decadent Venus was easy pickings for that twenty-first century Hitler's dream of cosmic empire.

MY name is Arthur Frane. You who read this story now, of course are familiar with momentous events into which I was unexpectedly

plunged—momentous for all mankind.

I write this narrative now to add the true details to what you have all read and heard blared by the newscasters

Downward plunged the wierd armada.



around the world. I have been extolled as a hero although I did nothing except try to keep from getting killed.

I was twenty-six years old last summer, in June of 2003, when fate so strangely brought Venta and me together. My family is wealthy, as you have heard. Do not envy me for that. An income of ten thousand decimars, however nice it may seem in theory, is in reality no advantage to a young man of twenty-six. I am a big blond fellow whom the newscasters have been pleased to call Viking-like and handsome as a god. I'm much obliged. But whatever truth there is in it, that too has been a disadvantage.

The weird events began in July, last summer, when with Jim Gregg I went hunting in that Adirondac forest. Jim and I were in Government College together. I left to spend my income and become a dawdler—the disadvantage of money; and Jim joined the Crime Prevention Bureau of the New York Shadow Squad. We got a one-day hunting permit. Jim took his official crime-tracker equipment, with an extra flash-gun for me; we flew to the Adirondac mountain slope which our permit named and hopefully set out on foot to try our luck.

But we had no luck. A few birds, which even the minimum pencil-ray flash had all but burned to a crisp, were all we had bagged. Evening came, with twilight settling so that the forest glades were deepening into purple. And then suddenly it seemed that we heard a rustling in the underbrush—a rustling which ought to be a deer.

We crouched in a thicket, waiting. The sound stopped. "Let's try the listener," I whispered.

Jim got out his little eavesdropping gadget. But he had no time to connect it. The rustling began again. It was obviously up a short slope no more than a hundred feet from us—some wild animal which seemed now to be retreating.

"I'll take a chance," I muttered. "If that's a deer, we'll lose it if I can't drill it now."

We knew it could not be a human, since our permit for today barred anyone else from the twenty square miles of Government preserve allotted to us. I fired at the sound, with my violet pencil-

flash eating through the underbrush at the top of the slope.

There was a startled, weird outcry; and from the summit of the little rise a shape broke cover. A girl! She came bursting from a thicket no more than three feet to the side of the swath my flash had burned, and for a second or two she stood poised on a rock with the open evening sky a background above and behind her. A slim shape of bare legs and arms with a brief drape from shoulders to her thighs. The starlight and fading daylight gleamed on her bronzed skin as though she were a metal statue.

"Well—I say—" Jim muttered.

THOUGHTS are instant things. There was in my mind the vague idea that here, by some wild circumstances, was a girl in a fancy-dress party costume or something of the kind. But the thought, and Jim's muttered words of astonishment, were in another second stricken away. She paused for that instant on the rock, and then she leaped. Amazing, incredible leap! It carried her in a flat arc some ten or fifteen feet above the ground and twenty feet away, where light as a faun she landed on the toes of her bare feet. Nearer to us now; and seeing us, perhaps for the first time, she stood and stared.

I could see the silvery streaks running through the black hair that framed her face. It was a queerly beautiful face, apparently devoid of normal cosmetic-make-up. Negroid? Oriental? In that second I had the thought that it was neither—nor anything else that I could name. A girl with a mysterious wild beauty which stirred my pulses.

"Well—good Lord—" Jim muttered again. He too was staring, with a hand in his shock of bristling red hair, and I can imagine the look of numbed astonishment on his freckled, pug-nosed face. "Good Lord, how did she jump like that?"

I heard myself stammering, "You—up there—what in the devil—"

Like a terrified fugitive the girl abruptly swept a look behind her; and then she leaped again, and landed almost beside us.

"You—you—Oh you mus' help me! There was a flash that tried to kill me—"

English! With weird, indescribable in-

tonation, she gasped the English words.

"I—shot at you," I stammered. "Sorry—we thought you were an animal. No human is allowed here today but us."

Somehow it seemed futile, incongruous that I should try to explain anything rational to a girl so weird as this.

But she smiled. "Oh—I thought—I thought—"

"Someone is after you?" Jim said quickly.

"Yes. I thought—but I guess not now. Oh you are good Earthmen—not like Curtmann. I escaped, and I have come long long a way from my poor terrified people."

I saw Jim glance at me significantly. We both had the same thought, of course. A girl demented; with painted skin and fancy dress—trappings of insanity; and she had escaped from some asylum?

But those leaps were far beyond the power of any trained athlete!

"What's your name?" I murmured.

"Venta. I was a prisoner—and now I have to tell someone of importance here on Earth. I did escape when I was brought here by Curtmann." She babbled it out, breathless, terrified. "I did not know what to do, he is so bad to my people—to the Midge—to all of us. And I—I do not love him. I am afraid of him. In Shan he rules—and my family now are all in the great Forest City. And Curtmann will capture that too."

Blankly Jim and I exchanged glances. And suddenly with a muttered oath, Jim gasped,

"My God, Art! Look at that—thing! There—behind you!"

I whirled. But whatever he had seen, or thought he saw, was gone.

"Behind me? What?"

"Why—why—" Jim could only gasp. The girl was staring at us blankly. Jim was stupefied into incoherency. "Why—why—a little thing—it ran—" And then he raised his left wrist with another muttered gasp.

"What in the devil?" I demanded. "Are you crazy too?"

"Electro-eavesdropper on us! Look—" An eavesdropper detector was on his wrist, connected with his watch. Part of his S.S. equipment and he always wore it. The underplate was glowing now, its

warmth against his flesh attracting his attention.

An eavesdropper being used against us! I knew it was illegal for anyone but a Federal Man to have one; but criminals had them, and most of the other S.S. devices and weapons, of course. Some criminal was near here, listening to us now!

"Someone not far away!" Jim gasped. "Look at that dial!"

His little detector-needle was swaying violently, in the range of one to two hundred feet. Then it swung back to normal as the ray evidently was shut off.

I snatched out my flash-gun. Jim and I crouched with the numbed, terrified girl between us.

"Oh—" she muttered. "They have come, and they will kill us."

"There it is again!" Jim's hand gripped my arm. "My God—that little thing!"

THE purple shadows of night were deepening in the forest now. But in the gloom I saw it. On the bole of a tree no more than six or eight feet from us a tiny figure stood peering at us. The glistening, brown-bronze figure of a man; a broad-shouldered, stocky little figure no more than a foot high! I had an instant glimpse of a powerfully-muscled body, a tiny, hairless round head, then the creature leaped to the ground, recovered its balance and ran. In another second it was lost in the gloom.

The girl too, had seen it. "A Midge! Here? Why—then Curtmann's men are here, too!"

She stopped abruptly. From the leafy darkness something hurtled into a tree beside us. There was the faint tinkling of fragile glass, then a sickening sweet smell assailed us, and sticky liquid splattered on us.

"Anesthesia-bomb!" Jim gasped. "Get away from here—grab the girl!"

My head was reeling, with senses fading so that the dim scene was blurring around me. Jim and I dragged the girl through the thickets. Then came a shot at us, the sizzling flash just missing us, shriveling the foliage over our heads. Jim's shot answered it. I saw a skulking figure by a nearby tree, and fired quickly. My shot caught him full; he went down.

In front of me, Jim had dropped prone into the brush. His voice warned: "They're here. Get down."

We had no chance to fight them off. I drilled a shape that appeared in front of me; but another pounced on my shoulders as I crouched. Blurred by the drug, I squirmed, reached up and grabbed him by the throat. But another man was on us. Jim's shot sounded again; and then as I fought, I saw several dark shapes leaping on him. His panting oaths mingled with the girl's scream.

In the melee glass hit my face, breaking with the sticky drug oozing out on me. A man's fist followed it, with a crack that made my head burst into roaring light before I drifted off into an abyss of nothingness. . . .

II

I CAME to with the sound of distant throbbing in my ears. It seemed that I was lying on a metal grid-floor; and as I stirred, a familiar voice sounded.

"Thank the Lord, you're coming out of it at last."

It was Jim, here on the floor with me, bending anxiously over me in a luminous darkness. His pug-nosed face grinned down at me.

"I sure thought you might never come back, Art. You've been a day, sleeping off that damned drug."

Dizzily I tried to sit up as he held me. "What—what happened? Where the devil are we?" Then I remembered the fight. "Venta—" I murmured.

"She's all right. I've seen her, and talked with her."

I could see that Jim and I were alone in a small, triangular metal apartment. A closed door was to one side. And to the other, there was a round bull's-eye window. It was black out there, with bright white points of stars. The thrumming was a faint distant electronic throb, off in this strange interior.

I could feel my strength rapidly coming back. I sat up, shoving Jim away. "I'm all right now. Where are we?"

He grinned wryly. "Hold your breath for a shock. We're out in Space, plenty far. I guess, by now, we're on our way to Venus!"

Out in Space! How often, like everyone else in our modern world of science, I had envisaged it, and wondered why it had never been made possible.

"On the way to Venus?"

"So they tell me, an' Lord knows I wouldn't doubt it. If you don't believe me, come take a look."

With his arm around me, I staggered dizzily to the bull's-eye porte. It was an amazing scene! The Heavens everywhere were a black vault, strewn with myriad white gems of the blazing worlds. Filling one whole side, the familiar Earth hung motionless. It was mottled with clouds, beneath which the configurations of the oceans and continents were plainly visible.

I stared, awed, wordless; and then, still weak and dizzy with the cold sweat of the drug chilling me, I was glad enough to sit down on the couch, with Jim beside me.

"Who's got us?" I asked presently.

"A fellow named Curtmann and his band. A dozen or more of them here on board. I've talked with one of them—they're all Earthmen—this ship was built on Earth. Would you believe it? A damned scientist from mid-Europe built it secretly. He never told the world about it, but gathered a bunch of crooks and beat it off."

"Not so fast," I murmured. "Don't get incoherent."

I TRIED to sort it out as he breathlessly told me what he had learned. Some eight or ten years ago, among the captive people of mid-Europe under police domination of the Anglo-American Federation, a fellow named Karl Curtmann had built this hundred foot cylindrical space-flyer. The same old urge for world conquest. But this fellow Curtmann had known that on Earth he had no chance. This was not 1915, nor 1939. And so he had gathered others like himself; all English-speaking, since their racial language had been banned by the Federation before they were born, and with his ship and his men, they had adventured into Space.

"Seems they landed on Venus," Jim was saying. "It was a fertile field for a world-conqueror, by what I hear! Peaceful, simple people, with these Earth cutthroats jumping on them. They used a bunch of

our Shadow Squad weapons, which was enough and plenty."

Once established there as a conqueror, Curtmann had gone back to Earth on several trips, for supplies and more weapons and men.

"I guess there are several hundred of 'em on Venus now," Jim went on. "Built themselves a little city, and made slaves out of the Venus-people. You can imagine what this style Earthman would do when he's a conqueror with nothing to challenge him! And the Venus-people are on the down-grade. Dying out, except for the Midgees."

"Midgees?"

"They're the little people of Venus. They serve. They believe that all Earth men are gods, or something." Jim shrugged. "Don't ask me. We'll find out soon enough."

The Midge! I remembered that little bronze man-figure which had peered at us.

"And Venta?" I prompted.

"Her father—No, I guess it's her grandfather—he's a leader on Venus. Religious leader, or something. He and some others have escaped to a Forest City. Curtmann had Venta. Venta says he's just trying to make her love him—make her see how wonderful he is. Curtmann, the Man of Destiny—I can't wait to meet him!"

He had taken Venta on one of his forays to Earth, and she had escaped from him. "An' they got us along with her," Jim finished wryly. "Damned lucky we didn't get killed. We will yet, most probably."

A little rasp here in the darkness made us turn. A doorslide had opened; a man's heavy-featured face scowled in at us.

"At last you have recovered," he said to me. His voice was the heavy, guttural timber of a mid-European. He was a villainous-looking fellow, his slack-jowled face bluish with a week's growth of beard.

"Yes," I said. "Fortunately for me. Are you Curtmann?"

"He's Frantz," Jim put in. "He's been feeding me."

"Tell your master I want to see him," I said. "And take me to the girl, Venta."

The fellow leered. "You talk like you own the ship," he commented.

The doorslide closed. His footsteps retreated, but presently they came back. He opened the door. "The Great-Master says,

bring you," he said with an ironic grin. "Come on. You can both come."

SILENTLY we followed him down a narrow metal corridor.

"This way—" I saw our captor now as a bulky six-foot fellow clad incongruously in a crudely plaited robe of dried vegetable fibre, draped upon him like a Roman toga. He stood aside at an oval doorway; and Jim and I went into a small triangular room. Starlight filtered into it from a side bull's-eye.

Clad still in her brief garment, Venta sat on a square pad on the floor. As we entered she flung me a look, and then stared straight ahead.

"So? This is the fellow who thought he would steal my little Venta? Come in, Franc. Stand over there; I want to look you over."

Karl Curtmann. He was seated in a small, straight-backed armchair. He was a smallish, slim fellow, not over forty perhaps. A vivid blue toga encased him; sandals were on his feet. At our entrance he raised one of his bare ornamented arms with a gesture.

The costume was queerly incongruous to a modern Earthman; but upon Curtmann there was an immense dignity, a sense of the consciousness of his own greatness. More than mere conceit, it seemed to radiate from him. On his heavy, square-jawed face there was a look of amused contempt as he regarded me.

"My little Venta has asked me not to kill you," he added. His voice was soft and suave. English was his native language, taught him exclusively by Government decree. But the inherited timbre was guttural. "That is fortunate, is it not?"

"Yes," I agreed. "Very. I thank her."

His eyes twinkled; his immaculate hands with jeweled fingers, brushed his crisp blond hair. "You can also thank me. I am permitting you to join our life. You know now, of course, that I am Master of Venus? It is their good fortune. Always I shall protect them from any harm, and teach them the life that is good for them."

He was utterly sincere. His eyes were gleaming with his fervour. Man of Destiny. He believed it with the faith of

a child. And now his gaze went to Venta.

"Her people—" He was still talking to me, though he stared at her. "Some of them still are misguided. Old Prytan, her grandfather, is a very wicked old man, Frane. He has fled to the Forest City. He defies my rule. I shall have to punish that Forest City."

Suddenly his face contorted; his arm shook as he pounded his fist on his chair. "I shall not tolerate it. They are all to die. Nor in the city of Shan itself will I have rebellion. I am a man of peace—there shall be no strife. And each year, from Earth, more of my men will come to mate with the Venus women. The new race. The new Empire of Curtmann. Is it not a wonderful future, Venta? I shall make you Empress."

"Yes," she murmured.

"Race of the Gods," he said. "And I—Karl Curtmann—"

He checked himself. There was a little sound of beating wings here in the dim starlit room. I turned as through the door a tiny shape came like a fluttering bird through the air. A footlong bronze man-shape. One of the Midge! Again my mind leaped back to that little figure in the Adirondac forest. It had had wings, though then I had not noticed them.

This one came and poised on the arm of Curtmann's chair. "What is it, Rahn?" he said.

The Midge's voice was tiny, but clear. "The flight-master has asked that you come now to check his calculations of our course." The English words, taught to this Midge, were quaintly intoned. The voice was gentle, humble.

Curtmann stood up. "All right. I shall go." He waved an arm at the burly Frantz who was standing silently to one side. "Our captives can remain here, Frantz."

He turned, smiled gently at Venta, and strode from the room.

AS the days passed we were allowed a fair freedom of movement. A freedom to plan—what? I must confess that Jim and I had no conception of what we might do in circumstances like these.

Once Venta had whispered to me, "We shall escape from here—it can be done."

Escape from this Curtmann, join

Venta's grandfather—old Prytan—out there in the Venus Forest City. . . . Certainly it was all that Jim and I could hope for. And then came that night when the misty lead-grey ball of Venus had grown to a monstrous disc beneath us, with the cone of its shadow blotting out the Sun as we dropped down into the heavy Venus atmosphere. There came a moment when Venta, Jim and I were alone, and from the dim corridor with a little beat of wings, Rhan, the Midge, came to join us. He was carrying an oxohydro heat-torch. Amazing little man-shape. The alumite torch was as big as himself, and heavier. His diaphanous, dragonfly wings struggled with it. Like a giant flying ant, with an ant's monstrous strength in proportion to its size. Panting, he fluttered heavily and laid it at my feet.

"You, the Great God," he said. "I serve you. Here it is."

He stood now by the torch he had brought. The muscles on his broad chest heaved under the sleek bronzed skin with his panting breath.

"For you," he added. "No one saw me. I got it for you. I did well, Seyla Venta?"

"Oh yes. Thank you, Rhan." Venta was trembling now with excitement. "When we get lower into the atmosphere, we'll go to one of the pressure-ports at the bottom of the hull. There are space suits there, if we can get to them."

"Let's close this door," Jim said quickly. "Not so loud, Venta."

We planned it, as the ship settled down through the heavy, sullen-looking Venus clouds and then burst out into the lower atmosphere with the dark surface of Venus far down beneath us. Rhan watched and reported that Curtmann and most of his men were forward by the control turret. Then Jim, Venta and I were able to get down through one of the dim corridors, down a little catwalk ladder into the lower hull. The metal pressure porte door was locked.

I stood at the bottom of the ladder. Above me the voices of Curtmann's ruffians were audible. Every moment I expected that we would be missed.

"Hurry it," I murmured.

The porte doorlock melted as Jim held

the torch upon it. We slid into the porte, closed the door after us. Venta, on the voyage to Earth, had been trained by Curtmann in the use of these pressure-suits, and in a moment we stood in them, helmeted, with the air bloating the suits so that we were shapeless monsters.

I opened the outer doorslide. A little at first, and then wider. In the rarified atmosphere of Venus at this fifty mile height, the air of the little porte went out with a rush. It blew us out with it. I had a sickening sensation of falling into nothingness. Then it seemed that my head steadied. I fumbled with a hand upon the anti-gravity mechanisms by which the fall could be guided.

Above me the dark finned shape of Curtmann's space ship was drawing swiftly upward and away. Head down, with the bloated shapes of Jim and Venta beside me, we plummeted like falling meteorites through the sub-stratosphere darkness.

III

"A RAINBOW storm is coming," old Prytan said. "We shall have to wait until it is passed before trying to get to the broken city."

We were in the depths of an orange-blue forest of giant, spindly vegetation that rose in fantastic shapes from the soft, porous ground five hundred feet or more into the air. Pods and vines hung upon the lacery of trees. There were huge vivid flowers, redolent with a perfume exotic, cloying in the heavy humid air.

Everything, particularly at first, to me was heavy, oppressive. Venus is denser than the Earth, and the gravity is a full third heavier. It made walking, to us Earthmen, a panting labor. I felt that I weighed, not my normal hundred and eighty pounds, but almost two hundred and fifty. For us to run seemed impossible.

I had seen but little of this Forest City. It was a group of perhaps a thousand dwellings, all seemingly built of slabs of the porous forest trees, with walls and roofs of thatch. The houses nestled between the great fantastic trees. Some were like birds' nests in the branches,

with vine-ladders from the ground leading up to them. The colors of the thatch were vivid blue, red and yellow.

It was a fairyland of woodland fantasy, peopled by the humans of this scattered, futile Venus-race. I had seen gaping groups of them as Venta and I pushed through them, heading for old Prytan's dwelling. Men, women and children crowded the flower-lined, crooked little city streets. They were all gaudily-dressed in toga-like fabrics made from the vivid-colored, dried vegetable fibres. A few of them had fled here from Shan where they had picked up a little English from the Earth-conquerors. But most of them babbled at me in their own weird tongue. They were a gentle people. The lack of struggle, lack of accomplishment for generations now, had stamped them with a futility. Here in the benign climate of Venus they had grown content with simple wants. Love-making, music—that was enough for them. The Midge attended their every want.

Decadence perhaps, but who shall say but what it is to be preferred to the bloody upward struggles of our own Earth's history? All that too, had been upon Venus. Far ahead of Earth in the life-cycle of its humans, there had been great scientific civilizations here. The science of war had risen into all its ghastly power and then had destroyed itself, with mankind at last coming to realize its tragic futility. There were ruins of great cities here, with the silt of centuries upon them and the forests growing lush amid their wreckage.

"You two Earthmen are not quite like Curtmann and his fellows," old Prytan said to me. His eyes twinkled beneath his shaggy white brows. His seamed old face wrinkled with a smile.

"No," I said. "We hope not."

"But your Earth still struggles, with each man wanting more than his neighbor."

We were in a room of a huge, crudely-built dwelling of thatch. A thousand Midgees had woven it in a day. Venta was here; and draped on the floor at her feet was the graceful, gaudily-clad figure of a young Venusman. His name was Jahnt. He was her cousin, I understood. A handsome fellow with longish, bushy dark

hair; an oval face with pointed chin, hawk nose and eyes with an almost Oriental slant. He spoke English as fluently as Venta. I don't know why I took an instant dislike to him, save that he always seemed to want to be beside Venta.

A rainbow storm was coming. I could see the premonitory signs of it. The room here was lighted with little braziers—seemingly the caged bodies of tiny insects which were luminous as fireflies. Through the oval window-openings the night outside was turgidly dark. But wind now was pattering the trees, and there were distant flares of weird opalescent lightning.

A tenseness was here in this room of old Prytan's home—and it was everywhere about the little city. Like an aura of terror it seemed to envelope us. All this day that had passed, Midges by hundreds had been flying in from Shan. And now, this evening, the big people themselves had begun coming. Fugitives. Terrified people who had escaped from Shan; rebellious, wanting to do something to rid Venus of these cruel conquerors, coming to Prytan as their leader; helplessly throwing themselves upon him, asking him what they should do. Groups of people milled in the streets, eyed the coming storm. Rebellion against the Earth-conquerors. But it was more than that. Among us all, here in this eerie opalescent room there was the feeling of impending disaster. Curtmann had returned to Shan. In a rage at the loss of Venta, he had learned that the rebellion against him was growing. Would he wait for old Prytan to organize some attack? Certainly I doubted it. And my mind swept back so that again I seemed to hear his grim words: "I shall have to punish that Forest City!"

Was Curtmann planning to strike at us now?

"... but until the storm is over we can do nothing," old Prytan was saying.

Even then, what could we do? In somber voices that seemed to echo dully through the rustic room and mingled with the weird storm-noises outside, we discussed it. One of the great broken cities of by-gone days was only some ten miles away. In it there was hidden away a

cache of ancient weapons of science.

"I have kept them workable," Prytan said grimly. "And my father before me also attended them. And before him, his father. But never did we really think the horrible time would come when they should be used."

BUT whatever we could do, certainly must be done soon. The news from Shan every moment was more serious. Upon Curtmann's return, open disorder had broken out in the capital city. As punishment, a thousand or more of the young Venusmen of the city had been summarily killed by the diabolic flash-guns of the Earthmen. "Only our men he kills," young Jahnt put in ironically. "Why not? Our women are very beautiful. Like you, is it not so, Venta?"

I tensed at the glance with which he swept her. "I shall bring in the supper," Venta said. His gaze followed her as she rose and left us.

"I tell you all this about our hidden weapons," Prytan was saying to me in his cracked treble voice. "We can trust you, even though you are Earthmen?"

"Yes," I agreed.

"Listen," Jim put in. "These young men you've got here—well, no offense meant—on Earth we'd call them ladylike." His gaze barely touched the gaudy figure of Jahnt and then went back to Prytan. "My business, sir, on Earth is to deal with criminals. I'm pretty good in a fight. You just give me some of your weapons." "I trust you," Prytan agreed. "Never, until tonight, has anyone but myself known about the weapons. If Curtmann knew it—"

"He won't," I said. "We'll get them tonight. We—"

I checked myself. The beat of wings sounded, and a Midge came through the window, and landed on Prytan's shoulder.

"Well, Meeta," he said, "you come with more bad news?"

A female Midge. It was the first one I had seen except at a distance. She was a fairylike little creature—a ten-inch high miniature of Venta. Her flesh was like pink-white satin, glistening in the insect-light. Her wings thrummed to balance her as she poised.

"English?" she said in her tiny voice.

"Yes," Prytan nodded. "These are good Earthmen."

Her pixie-like, tiny face turned toward me. I saw then, in those tiny glowing eyes, the leap of her instinctive adoration for my giant size. Here a new God for her to worship and serve.

"English, yes," she agreed. "Master, there have been still more killings. They kill our men now for no reason; and those of the women who are young and beautiful they have herded together into a harem."

Prytan's old body trembled with anger. "We must stop it. And Meeta, have you told the Midge to meet us in the broken city?"

"Master, yes. They will be there when the storm is passed. We cannot fly in the wind, and even now it is very strong."

I could hear it, crackling through the giant foliage outside. Then there was a monstrous flare of color as though a rainbow had burst around us.

"It gets bad," young Jahnt muttered. He went to one of the windows; then sauntered to a door-oval and disappeared.

Meeta, I understood now, was one of the leaders of the Midge. It was her brother who had aided us to escape from Curtmann's ship. I told her about it now as she perched on my hand, with her soft eyes roaming my face and her tiny lips parted with eager breath as she listened.

"Oh I am glad of that. Rahn so wants to do what is right in serving our Gods. But it is confusing, Gods here on Venus who fight with one another—"

Through the window, upon a blast of storm-wind another little figure came fluttering. Another female Midge, like Meeta. With beating wings she hovered a second and then fell to the floor at our feet.

"Mela!" old Prytan gasped. "What is it?"

The storm had tossed her against a tree. One of her wings was broken; blood was on her body. But she had struggled on to us, bringing her news.

"What is it?" old Prytan demanded.

"Curtmann comes! He and all his men—his army, coming now to attack the Forest City!"

Curtmann coming to attack us! A dozen little male Midges here on the

floor of the room heard it and scurried away.

"Curtmann coming?" Prytan gasped. "Why—why we will not be ready for him."

It stunned us. Within a minute, out in the city, the news was spreading with cries of the frightened people. A panic was beginning here. That would have to be controlled.

"They've left Shan already?" I demanded of the little Midge.

"No. Perhaps not. But they are ready—the storm may hold them off."

I WAS on my feet. Old Prytan was trembling with the palsy of his confused terror. By what Jim and I had seen of the young men of the Forest City, there was not one who could be counted on to do anything constructive in this crisis. If the Venus-people were to have any leadership, it would have to be Jim and me.

"Send word that the women and children are to stay in their homes," I said. "There must be no panic. Have the young men come here. Storm or no storm we shall have to get to the broken city, and get those Venus-weapons."

"How far is it from here to Shan?" Jim put in.

"Twenty Earth-miles perhaps," old Prytan stammered. "If Curtmann and his men should start now—"

"Maybe they won't," I said. "The storm is still going strong."

"Where is Venta?" Prytan stared helplessly about the room. "She said she would bring us food. What use of that? We have no time to eat it now." He suddenly raised his shaking old voice. "Venta. Venta, where are you?"

There was no answer from the nearby interior door-oval through which Venta had gone. Just blank, stark silence. Horror struck at me.

Jim and I were on our feet. Jim gasped, "I'll go see." But before he could move, we heard a woman's moan, followed again by silence!

Jim broke it with an oath. I tossed little Meeta into the air with a flip of my hand as I ran toward the crude kitchen, out there beyond the dim door-oval.

Thank God, it was not Venta. On

the packed loam of the floor an old serving woman lay sprawled. Her throat was a ghastly welter of crimson, and near her a Midge lay dead.

The old woman was still alive. She tried faintly to gasp in English as I bent over her.

"He—took her—Venta—"

"Who took her?"

"Jahnt—he—"

The blood choked her. But I had no interest in hearing more. Jahnt!

"Why—he's got the secret of those weapons now!" Jim gasped. "Get the idea, Art?"

The commotion had brought others. They all stood milling, helpless, frightened. Jim and I shoved them away.

"He'd probably head for the broken city," Jim said. "It's much closer to here."

"That he might do," Prytan agreed. "And where is his Midge—you people—you have seen little Ort lately?"

"Jahnt could send that Midge flying to Shanga to tell Curtmann about the weapons," I suggested.

Old Prytan could only stammer assent to the possibility. And if Curtmann and his ruffians got to that cache before we could get there, that indeed would be the end of any possibility of overcoming him.

"Where is Meeta?" I demanded. "Meeta knows the location of the broken city."

She fluttered from behind me at the sound of my voice. "Master I am here. What I can do to serve?"

"We're going after Jahnt," Jim said. "He can't have gotten far."

"But you run so heavily," old Prytan murmured. "My young men here—"

They were all standing looking frightened and confused. Jim swept them with a glance and drew me past them. It occurred to me that we might use the three space-suits in which we had escaped from Curtmann. With their anti-gravity mechanisms and tiny rocket-streams we could propel ourselves over the forest. But we found now that they were gone.

Precious minutes were passing. We would have to go on foot. At the door we paused, appalled by the wind and a chromatic burst of glaring light. Meeta

fluttered in the air beside my head, and as the wind hit her she was tossed back.

"You can't fly out into that, Meeta?"

"No, I am afraid it's not possible now. But you can carry me."

She fluttered to my shoulder, crouching with a tiny hand gripping my coat collar. With Jim beside me we plunged out into the roaring riot of the rainbow storm.

IV

"GUESS we'll have to wait a bit longer," Jim murmured. "But it seems to be easing, don't you think?"

In a sheltered recess of the forest we were crouching, forced to wait for the weird storm to pass. There had been no possible chance of finding the fleeing Jahnt. We could only hope now that he would go on to the broken city. The storm seemed to be lessening but still it was a roar of wind which cracked through the spindly giant trees, often bringing down great segments of branches which it had torn loose.

A lull came at last, and through a ragged, littered forest Jim and I pushed our tortuous way. Meeta could fly now. She guided us, and with little forays hummed ahead and to the sides, seeking some signs of Jahnt and Venta. But there were none.

The storm had been a torture of delay. In my heart now I had no thought that we would be able to locate Jahnt and Venta. I could only hope that they might be in the broken city. Had Curtmann received news of the Venus weapons? My mind was upon Venta, but still I could envisage that bloodthirsty band of Earth cutthroats advancing upon the Forest City.

"I say, is it much further?" Jim demanded suddenly of Meeta. "This is tough going for us."

"Master, no. It is ahead, just down that slope."

The dim forest glade was descending into a great shallow area of deeper shadow. And presently we could see the ruins of tumbled, broken buildings lying here, half buried by the rank forest growth. In the turgid dimness, with a faint orange luminosity that seemed in-

herent to the great trees, it was an eerie place of colored shadows. Great buildings were everywhere around us now, weird of shape and substance, some of them still partly erect with the spindly trees growing through them.

It was a place of the ghosts of Venus' past.

"It is down in here," Meeta said, pointing.

A littered rocky depression was before us. A ruined amphitheatre, with its walls almost gone and the forest like a monstrous clump in its middle. We descended into it. The ground in places was rocky. Some natural cataclysm must have torn this ground since the original arena was built.

Then we saw the cache of weapons. It was half a demolished room in some broken structure that now was unrecognizable; an apartment partly open at the top, of some two hundred feet diameter. A little light filtered down from the lurid greenish-yellow storm-clouds high overhead.

"No one here ahead of us, Jim?" In the darkness, with Meeta perched again upon my shoulder, we stood peering and listening. There was only silence.

"Where are the weapons?" Jim demanded.

Meeta led us. "There in that little recess, Master. Many old broken boxes are filled with them."

We stood before the rock-shelves, numbed with disappointment and horror. The crumbling old metal boxes were here. But they were strewn about; broken open; empty! The weapons were gone!

"**G**ONE!" Jim gasped. "That damned Jahnt!"

Abruptly Meeta cried, "Look! He is over there!"

With his hiding place discovered, Jahnt leaped suddenly erect from the shadows of a rocky niche. A knife was in his hand. I was nearest to him. I leaped. But I had miscalculated my abnormal heaviness. I hit the rocks a few feet short of him, stumbled, almost went down. As my arms flailed I saw him over me, his pointed face demoniac with lustful triumph, his knife stabbing at my chest.

There was a whirring of wings, and a glistening body went past my head. Meeta. The ten inches of her elfin form flapped and struck Jahnt in the face. He hit wildly at her with his left hand, went off balance, with his knife-thrust going wild; and collided against me so that I was able to fling my arms around him. Then my left hand caught his wrist, twisted and the knife fell away. We went down, locked together, rolling. And suddenly I felt the knife hit my hand. Meeta with swift agility had retrieved it and brought it to me. The lithe Jahnt, far stronger than he looked, was momentarily on top of me. I seized the knife, stabbed upward into his chest; and with a choked cry he went limp, fell forward on me.

I scrambled to my feet. Jahnt wasn't quite dead, but obviously dying. Jim and I bent over him.

"You got away with the weapons?" Jim muttered. "Or are they still around here?"

"Curtmann has them. My little Midge flew to him, and came back with some of Curtmann's men. They left just a little while ago. I—showed them how to use the weapons. You will—be defeated by Curtmann. You damned—"

Again little Meeta suddenly called us. "Here! Here is Venta!"

She was lying, bound and gagged, but unharmed in the recess of some crags nearby. Jim and I rushed to her.

The three spacesuits were with her. Jim had gone back to the dying Jahnt and he called me. Blood was gushing now from Jahnt's mouth; he was gasping, but still he was trying ironically to smile.

"I—did not tell Curtmann's men that I had Venta. Why should I be in the battle? I just thought I would stay here with Venta, and if Curtmann won, then I would join him."

"Has he started from Shan?" Jim demanded.

"Oh—yes. He and his men must be half way to the Forest City by now. I am sorry now I did not go with them."

I had a sudden thought. "Is he planning to use that spaceship of his?"

Jahnt was choking now with the blood in his throat. Then he gasped, "No—his men said they—could not handle it—so close to the ground—such a—short dis-

taunce. They are on foot—in the forest—”

Venta was with us now, bending down over the dying Jahnt. His glazing eyes saw her, and he murmured, “You—if you had loved me—this would not have happened. I’m dying—you’ll all die when—Curtmann uses those weapons against you. I’m—glad of that—”

His body twitched. Horribly the blood rattled in his throat, choking him; and then in another moment he was gone.

“They’re half way to the Forest City,” Jim muttered. “Good Lord, we’ve got to stop them. But how? How can we do it, Art?”

Venta was standing apart from us, with the tiny Meeta on her shoulder. They were murmuring together, and abruptly Meeta flew to me.

“She says it is right and it can be done. We Midges—serve the Gods, and surely now we know the good Gods from the evil.”

AN army of the Little People! Jim and I stood blankly listening while Venta told us what she and Meeta had been planning. A myriad of Midges could be rallied now. And they had human intelligence . . . Only a foot high, or less. But, especially the females, they could fly with the agility of humming birds.

“And we can be armed,” Meeta cried. She hummed away, came back in a moment. In her tiny hand there was a thorn. It was no more than two inches long, but to her it was a sword, stiff and sharp as a needle.

“The poisoned enta-thorn!” Venta exclaimed. “But I did not know that any of the enta-shrub was near here.”

“I found it,” Meeta said proudly. “There is much of it.”

“What’s that noise?” Jim abruptly demanded.

With my nerves taut, I stood tense. A faint thrumming was audible. We had left the cave where the weapons had been hidden, and were out in the broken amphitheatre with the ruined ancient buildings like spectres around us. Far overhead there was a little starlight, straggling faintly down. The thrumming grew louder. A tiny blurred shape came down through the darkness. . . . And then another—and another.

The Midges were arriving from Shan, expecting to carry the Venus-weapons from here to the Forest City. In a moment a dozen were here, then a hundred. They came in little groups, males and females, keeping separate in the flight. Like huge insects they thrummed around us, and then settled and stood awaiting our commands. Then Meeta was among them, telling what had happened and explaining that they must fight for the lives of the Forest City people.

For a moment there was awed silence; then a tiny blended chorus of voices, and little shapes humming away to get the thorns.

Jim gripped me. “By the Lord, it’s our only chance! You can see that, Art.”

“Yes. You and I in the space-suits, if we can maneuver them. An army in the air—the Midges and you and I to plan their battle—direct them.”

“And I shall be with you,” Venta cried.

Vaguely I had thought to leave her here, or send her off to the Forest City on foot. She persuaded me at last.

“You talk of planning the battle,” she cried. “But almost none of the Midges speak your language. I shall give your commands to them.”

Once we had decided, a desperate haste was on us. Midges were arriving here now from the Forest City. Some of them had seen the oncoming columns of Curtmann’s men, down in the forest. They were more than half way from Shan. Occasionally their Earth-flash weapons would stab into the forest ahead of them.

Within ten minutes or so we were ready. I had sent a few of the swiftest-flying Midges back to the Forest City to tell Prytan what had happened. His young men were to arm themselves as best they could, and take position. In a ring around the city, prepared to make a last stand, if we should fail. All the Midges now in the Forest City were to arm themselves with the poisoned thorns, and come to join us in the battle as fast as they could.

Then Venta, Jim and I had donned the spacesuits. No need to inflate them now; we only needed the anti-gravity mechanisms, and the rocket-streams for balancing and for lateral movement.

We rose presently into the air, up into

the starlight with the ruined piles of the broken buildings and the forest dropping away beneath us. At five hundred feet we poised. In thrumming groups the Midges, more than two thousand of them now, circled around us. Then, with Jim, Venta and me leading, our bodies in the baggy spacesuits poised almost horizontal in the air and the Midges strung out in long thin lines like insects behind us, we plunged forward to the battle.

V

"THERE they are!" Jim called.

Five hundred feet below us the forest tree-tops were a fantastic matted mass of vivid vegetation. And suddenly, down in a glade, the line of Curtmann's men was visible. More than I had thought—there seemed a full four hundred of them. In two columns they plodded slowly forward. With them was a great wheeled cart, like a clumsy barge. Evidently Curtmann had built it in Shan. It toiled forward, with the marching men in advance of it and behind it. We could see that it was drawn by harnessed lines of Midges—hundreds of the tiny figures plodding on the ground, bending hunched as they pulled the huge creaking vehicle. The top of the cart was uncovered and a dozen men were riding in it. Groups of them were seated, around a little raised platform on which was mounted what seemed a huge projector.

"Keep the Midges high," I called to Venta who was near me. "Wait until I give the signal."

Our Midges were circling, wildly excited now that the enemy was in sight beneath them. Jim and I had discussed our tactics. In groups of about a hundred we would send the Midges plummeting down. Each would try to stab one of Curtmann's men and then come up again. The enta-poison, Venta had told us, was deadly—sure death if enough of it got into the blood-stream. But it did not act at once; five minutes or more was necessary before the victim would feel its lethal effect.

We made a great sweeping half-circle, plunging down as though to attack and leveling at above two hundred feet. As we passed over the lines of watching men

and the cart, two or three bolts stabbed up, fell short. Then a man's voice roared orders to withhold the fire.

Curtmann. As we passed at the lower altitude over the cart I saw him standing on a raised platform near its front. We swept past, and up again.

"We better swoop now," Jim urged. "This is as good a place to attack as any we'll ever get."

That was obvious. The lines of men were in an open glade. A few hundred feet ahead of them, the forest was dense again. It would be far more difficult for our Midges to swoop down and attack amid the enveloping lacery of vegetation.

And Curtmann, even though probably he had not as yet the least fear of us, already was starting to advance again. The men in front were marching on. Orders were being roared at the harnessed Midges. The cart went into motion. And the Forest City certainly was no more than a few miles ahead. Curtmann's murderous band would be there in an hour or two.

But still I hesitated to give the signal.

Little Meeta hovered before me. "The Master-God will order us down now?" she pleaded. "We will serve you well."

My heart was pounding. I nodded, with a lump in my throat that choked my voice as I shouted the signal sending so many of them to die.

A DESIGNATED quarter of them swooped down. From up at this height, Venta, Jim and I hovered, with the rest of the Midges in a gathered group around us. All of us staring down.

The cloud of some five hundred Midges swooped, circled, and then plummeted. For a second or two the startled Curtmann men merely seemed to stare upward. Then the Midges were upon them, fluttering into their faces, jabbing at them. The men's arms wildly failed to fend off the viciously attacking little bodies.

Some of the Midges were caught, bashed into pulp and hurled away with a single flailing blow. Some were caught in huge hands, squeezed to death and flung to the ground. The oaths of the startled men came up, mingled with the

cries of the Midges, then the tiny fluttering shapes were rising again. A shot stabbed at them, its crackling bolt stabbing through a group of them. It was like a monstrous blow-torch stabbing into fluttering moths. It left a trail of wisps of light as their bodies were consumed.

The rest of them came up and joined us, panting, flopping.

"Good enough," Jim murmured. "Five minutes more and we'll see what really happened."

But I was cold inside. No more than half the Midges had come back. Two hundred or more of them gone already. And here in the air, some of them, wounded, were bravely struggling not to fall.

The men and the huge cart down in the glade had started forward again. Suddenly it was apparent that the harnessed lines of Midges on the ground were in revolt. They milled in confusion, struggling to cast off the lines that held them. We heard Curtmann roaring threats at them. And then he fired a bolt horizontally through them. It cut a ghastly swath; a burst of trailing little wisps of fire. Beside me, Venta gasped in horror; and Jim murmured,

"Fool! With what's left of those Midges that heavy cart will never move again."

The cart had stopped. Curtmann, doubtless regretting his shot of exasperation, was roaring more orders. The straggling columns of his men came toward the cart, and all of them bunched around it in a solid group, out there in the center of the open glade.

"Got them stalled," Jim said grimly. "Much better for us."

If the poison would work. But would it? At three hundred feet we were still circling in great humming sweeps while again I withheld my signal. Did I dare send the Midges down for a general attack? Every shot cut them so horribly into nothingness. Off to the side, in the direction of the Forest City, other Midges were appearing now. Little groups of them, males and females, humming toward us, joining our circling ranks. Reinforcements. In a minute or two it seemed that a new thousand were here to swell our weird little army.

"Look!" Jim suddenly cried triumphantly. "The enta-poison!"

Up to now, in these tentative exchanges, Curtmann and his men doubtless had contemptuously figured that this engagement was harassing, but certainly nothing worse. Some of his men had been stabbed by little thorns. What of it? But down there now a new confusion was apparent. One of his men on the ground beside the cart suddenly staggered and fell. Then another. In the cart a group of them called with startled questions. Two of them by the big projector abruptly slumped in their seats with their fellows bending anxiously over them.

A moment of startled confusion. A dozen stricken men. And then others. What was happening must have dawned on Curtmann. In the starlit dimness down there on the cart we saw the blob of his figure leap erect.

And then Curtmann, at last realizing the deadliness of this menace, went into action! From the cart there was a little puff, with the hissing, popping sound of it coming up to us a few seconds later. A small round blob rose toward us, went harmlessly through us and burst up in the starlight. An electrolite-flare. It glared with a lurid, prismatic splash of color in the sky, illumined brightly the tiny flying dots of our Midges.

Just that few seconds and then the great projector hurled its missile at us—a blob coming slowly up in an arc. The blob burst. It seemed as though suddenly there was an earthquake in the air—split columns of air rushing together with a deafening thunderclap. The air rocked me, hurled me sidewise; the brief roar was deafening.

"A thunder-thrower!" Venta gasped as she clung to me.

In the cataclysm of air the cloud of Midges was hurled into chaos, their bodies knocked together, whirling end over end, some of them dropping with broken wings.

Just a few seconds, and now the blue-white starlit night had been transformed into a chaos of glaring light and roaring, clapping sound. Flares were bursting everywhere; the cracking thunderclaps came one upon the other in a chaos of prismatic horror. Curtmann's hand-

flashes were stabbing recklessly up through it. One of longer range burned a wide swath with the bodies of Midges bursting into a myriad pin-points of light.

In the rocking turmoil I heard Jim shouting, "Good God, we can't stay up here!"

HALF our Midges already were gone! Everywhere little broken dots were drifting or falling down.

"Down!" I shouted. "Venta—Meeta—tell them! Everyone down. Don't come back up—everyone for himself, now!"

In the roaring chaos of pyrotechnic glare what was left of our Midges swooped to the attack. With the rocket-streams at last righting my whirling body, head down I plummeted. The glare from above revealed Curtmann's men far more plainly now. Everywhere the men were staggering. In the cart some of them had fallen, but others were still erect, frantically working the projectors and stabbing with the hand heat-flashes. Our Midges were among them now, desperate fluttering little figures, stabbing at their faces. On the ground some of the staggering men were trying to get into the forest underbrush. I plummeted toward a group of them.

I hit the ground in the midst of a staggering group, with a thump that all but knocked the breath from me. Two of the men staggered at me. I was unarmed. My fist knocked one down, and I gripped the other as he half fell upon me. He was still clutching his flashgun. I seized it, knocked him away and rose again into the roaring tumult of the air.

"Art! You got a gun? So did I."

Jim was here with me; side by side we rose. I saw the cart directly underneath me. His figure painted lurid, the desperate Curtmann was still erect. Almost the last one now. And I saw that he was struggling with a projector which had not yet been in use. A tiny figure flapped against my face. Little Meeta. She gripped my shoulder, clung, and her tiny voice gasped in my ear.

"That weapon Curtmann has—the big molecule-melter—very long-range—the Forest City."

With a burst of numbing horror I

understood it. This projector would cut the forest and the ground into a leprous molten swath, out to the Forest City itself.

I plummeted down, with Meeta still clinging desperately to my neck. Curtmann saw me coming. With a wild oath he dropped the projector and fired at me with a hand-flash. It missed. There was just a second when I leveled off, heading horizontally at him. The glare was on his sweat-bathed face, contorted with his lust; but I saw a look of despairing terror there as my flash drilled him and he fell as I swooped close over him.

We rose at last, high into the starlight. So pitifully few of us, gathering in a little broken, circling group. Beneath us now there was only a lurid red-yellow fire-pit of molten bubbling rocks where the forest glade had been. Then the heavy turgid smoke and gas-fumes settled upon it like a shroud.

Almost silently we struggled back through the starlight to the Forest City. Jim and Venta and little Meeta were here with me, but our little Midges were struggling to keep aloft. Dozens of them were clustering upon Jim and Venta and me. Their tiny, gasping voices were horrible. And we were the victors! It came to me then that surely whatever has been said and written of the futility of human killing, can never adequately picture it.

* * * *

I think that is all I need recount. You have all heard how we returned to Earth, and the stir that my news brought. I should have been considered a charlatan perhaps, with my wild tale. But there was the spaceship; and Jim, Venta, and little Meeta. Scientists have inspected Venta now. It was an ordeal. But mostly they have been interested in Meeta.

That is passed. There are others on Venus like Venta, and others like our little Midge. We are living now on Earth, with Jim near us. Certainly neither here, nor on Venus, do we want any turmoil.

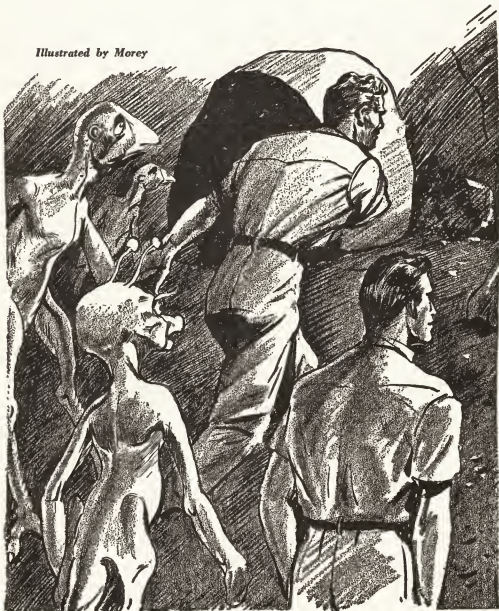
With Jim for my friend, and the adoration of little Meeta who thinks me in very truth, a God—and the love of my dear wife—certainly I am a mortal very singularly blessed.

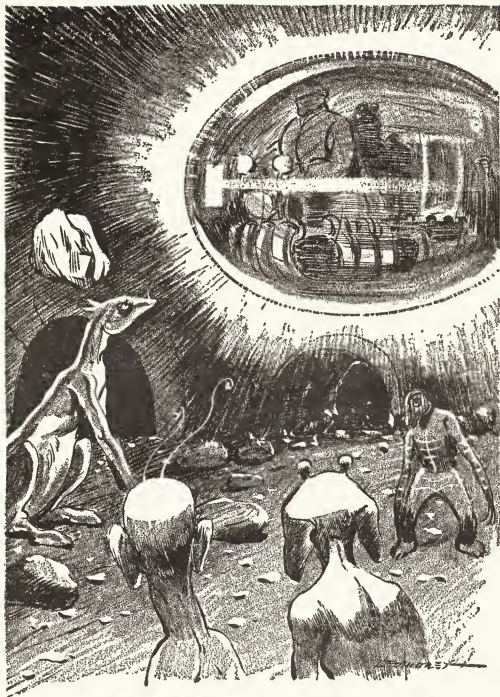
OUT OF THIS WORLD

By HENRY HASSE

There was no escape but death from that fetid prison planet and its crazed, sadistic overseer.

Illustrated by Morey





Straight at the glittering machine McGowan hurled the heavy boulder.

WHEN the Earth supply ship set down upon prison planet Number Seven last week, a curious state of affairs was found: the prisoners below

mining the ore as usual, the overseer dead, and every indication of some stark drama having taken place. In the study of the overseer's house one man was found dead,

apparently by his own hand, and beside him on the desk was a hastily scribbled document which is herewith published.

We hated Marnick.

Because he was an Earthman and because he laughed, we hated him. Awake and asleep, at our daily drudge of labor and in the throes of sluggish nightmare, with a fierce tenacity from the very depths of our souls—those of us who still had souls—we hated him. And there was not a man among us who had not sworn to kill him if given the chance, who did not dream of being *the one*. For we knew that some day it was going to happen.

But when? It seemed impossible. Daily that is what I thought as I trudged wearily to my place in B-Tunnel two miles below. We were forty men against him, Martians and Earthmen alike. Once there had been Venusians here, too, but they died too easily, and now Venusian criminals were sent elsewhere. Forty against Marnick, but still he was Law here on the tiny barren satellite of Jupiter—the seventh or eighth in orbit, I have long since forgotten which. The Triplanet Federation had appointed him overseer, then had immediately forgotten him and us. Out of our way, you criminal scum! Out of the sight and memory of men! Thus it was.

Yes, Marnick was law and lord and master of all he surveyed, and believe me he surveyed us well. He used to come down the central vertical shaft in his little case of special glassite, and hover there above us, watching; sometimes unbeknownst by us; and heaven help any worker who fell under his gaze, who he thought might be shirking. Marnick reserved a very special fate for shirkers, a certain torture, so I had heard.

NOW all that I had heard came rushing back to flood my brain, as I stood tensely alert, listening to the raucous, inhuman laughter that surged down the central shaft to reach our ears. Again it came and yet again, rising to insane pitch.

I rested my short-handled hand-pick against the little heap of radite ore. I wiped my sweated brow with fingers that burned and tingled from contact with the

radite. I peered covertly around at the many tunnels converging into the central place, and saw the other workers, Martians, and Earthmen, cowering under that sound of laughter. I wondered if I looked to them as they looked to me. I knew I was afraid. That was Marnick's laughter, I had heard it before. His special torture was going on again. Would I be next? So far I had luckily escaped.

I tried to straighten up into a semblance of courage, but again that shrieking laughter came drifting down to cower me. At the same time McGowan left his tunnel next to mine, and came strolling over to me. I was aghast. For any man to so much as leave his post, meant that he would receive the same punishment that some poor devil up there was now receiving. But McGowan always was a reckless one. Tall, brutish, dark and always scowling, a light of indomitable spirit shone perpetually out of his contrasting gray eyes. Those eyes were now hate-filled as he cocked his head and listened to that laughter.

"If only he wouldn't laugh," McGowan said in a voice so calm that it was doubly terrible. "If only he would go ahead with his torture, and watch it if he wished. But to laugh! And to let us know that he laughs! That is the crowning touch. Some day, Reed, I swear to you—"

"Yes, I know," I whispered fearfully. "Some day one of us is going to kill him. A favorite dream here."

"Not someone, Reed. Me! That is a privilege I reserve. And I shall not kill him. At least not in the usual way. I have a very special revenge planned for Mr. Marnick."

That was a story I had heard before, too; but now something in McGowan's voice caused me to look sharply up at him. And the hate that smoldered in those eyes was such as I cared not to look upon. I glanced quickly away, and then I heard a smooth familiar hum from the central shaft. I knew what it was. I swooped for my hand-pick and began to ply it industriously.

"Quick, McGowan, get back to your work!" I whispered. "Marnick's coming down again!" I'm sure McGowan knew that as well as I did, but he simply stood there, gazing almost expectantly at the

place where the shaft led up through the cave roof. "You damn fool!" I whispered, but there was a tight little smile on McGowan's lips as he stood there.

The hum continued. Even as I continued to hack at the hard-grained rock I shot a sidelong glance up at the shaft. Marnick's vehicle appeared suddenly there, seemingly suspended in the air. It was simply a glassite-enclosed, rounded cage, large enough to contain Marnick and the two lumbering, Jovian brutes he kept always with him. A pale violet halo hovered around the entire structure. It hung there just below the cave roof.

I could glimpse Marnick standing there erect, arms folded, peering haughtily down at us. Naturally a tall man, he always seemed taller and more forbidding in that posture. His hair was gray, but no grayer than his face; and against that grayness his eyes were dull black and quite expressionless, as if at one time he had seen some sight that had burned them out.

But now his arms unfolded and he leaned tensely forward. His thin colorless lips twitched as if in disbelief. A second later his rasping voice went bounding about the walls: "You! Earthman, over there! Get back to your work!"

He was speaking to McGowan and we all knew it. McGowan stood only a few feet from me, but I dared not even glance up at him now. I glimpsed him, however, bending down slowly, deliberately, and I saw his right hand seize a good-sized lump of radite ore from my pile. He straightened just as deliberately, turned to face Marnick and then said: "Go to hell!" With those words, McGowan drew back his hand and hurled the radite lump at Marnick's cage.

ALL of us in that moment paused to watch, and all of us were aghast at McGowan's futile bravado. We knew that not even an atom-blast, much less a lump of rock, could penetrate that mysterious force-barrier Marnick had erected around himself. That's what made the act so terrible, for McGowan knew it, too. And he wore a satisfied little smile as he did it.

The rock didn't come within a yard of Marnick's cage. It struck against the violet force-halo, bounded back and clattered to the floor. Marnick's lips split

into what might have been a grin; he touched a button beside him and the cage dropped the rest of the way to the cave floor. Its door opened and the two Jovian brutes stepped quickly out. Grinning through thick, blubbery lips, with huge powerful hands reaching out, they strode purposefully toward McGowan.

McGowan made no defensive gesture. He stood there still smiling a little, as though hugely satisfied with what he had done. The Jovians seized him ungentily, hurried him back to the cage and into it. The door closed and the cage slowly began to rise. The Jovians released his arms then, and McGowan acted with customary deliberateness as his right fist lashed up and crashed into Marnick's mouth. Marnick staggered back, his face a gushing well of red; but with a seeming flick of the wrist his paralyzer tube was in his hand, its pale beam spurting out. McGowan sank down in a huddled little heap, but even so, his very attitude as he lay there unconscious seemed one of satisfaction. The cage rose swiftly up and out of sight.

I didn't allow myself to think of the fate that would be McGowan's now. As we worked we listened again for the sound of Marnick's insane laughter. But it never came. He knew that we hated him, and he loved it. It was a sort of little game he played with us. He knew that we would be listening for his laughter now, so he chose not to let us hear it; to make us wonder. Psychologically it was much more terrible.

That Marnick was a devil.

FOUR days later McGowan came back to us.

Rumor among us had it that Marnick maintained special quarters up on the surface of this satellite, a stone house against the barren rock; and that in this house was a certain room into which Marnick thrust the men who displeased him. Beyond this even rumor failed to go, but we often hazarded guesses. The most prevalent guess was that Marnick released hordes of Callistan Gnishii into this room, then stood at a glass-paned door and shrieked with insane laughter at the antics of the unfortunate victims. The Gnishii are tiny little sharp-tipped devils, scarcely

three inches in length. Hard-shelled, blazing red in color, they surely must be a spawn of hell; for they are quite harmless except when in the presence of human flesh, and then they seem to go wild.

We guessed that Marnick might be employing these Gnishii, because several of his victims who came back to us had hundreds of fresh scars covering their legs from ankles to knees. But these men seemed to prefer not to speak of what they had undergone, and the rest of us weren't too anxious to know.

So now, four days later, McGowan came back to us. He stumbled into our quarters along the murky tunnel just above the vein we were at present working. I rose up out of restless sleep and saw McGowan going along the tunnel to certain of the men, silently rousing them. Kueelo and V'Narik, both Martians, joined him; as well as Smith and Blakely and Wilkinson, Earthmen. These five, together with McGowan, had formed a special little cliche among themselves, and almost daily went off for a secret meeting somewhere during our sleep period. Innumerable times I had seen them do that, but I didn't much care, feeling that whatever they might be planning would be futile in the end.

Now I rolled over in my bunk, turned my face to the stone wall and tried to get back to sleep; I needed much sleep in preparation for the morrow, because lately the radite emanations had been fast sapping my strength. Then, to my amazement, I felt a light hand on my shoulder and I knew it was McGowan. I heard his voice in my ear, scarcely a whisper:

"Reed! You awake? Come on and go with us; we need you!"

THEY needed me! Wondering and doubting, I rose silently up and followed the six of them toward the dead end of the tunnel. Blakely carried an electric lantern, carefully shaded. A quarter of a mile further we came to the tunnel's end. There in the dim light I gazed around me at the worked-out rock. The radite vein here, I knew, had been exhausted years ago, even before I had come.

As I stood apart, watching, the six of them seized upon a protruding rock and

pushed with a certain unison that could only have come with long practice. The rock rolled smoothly away and revealed a ragged little ravine leading up and into the tunnel wall. We entered, and they pulled the huge rock back into place. We began to climb. The ravine was scarcely shoulder-width. A few minutes later, however, it widened out into a large, natural cave!

Blakely placed the light in the center, and we sat in a circle around it. We could only see each other's faces dimly. The two Martians' were dark and leathery, with thick-lidded expressionless eyes. The three Earthmen appeared a little anxious as they glanced at McGowan. I knew what they were thinking, wondering; I was wondering myself.

As though reading our thoughts McGowan said: "Yes, it—it was pretty terrible." But by the look in his eyes alone, dim as it was, we knew that was a masterpiece of understatement. "But that's beside the point," he went on. "Whatever I went through up there, it was worth it. And it had to be done. For your information, Reed"—he turned his head to look at me—"we're going to escape from these tunnels. Then we're going to kill Marnick. When that's accomplished, we'll think about escaping from this planet."

"But—but how—" I stammered. "You know you can't possibly—"

McGowan gestured impatiently. "I know everything you're going to say. We've gone over it thoroughly. Let's see, you've been here only two years, isn't it, Reed? And the average life here is five; and I have already been here seven. Yes, I've clung on here longer than most men do, knowing that some day my chance would come; and now it is near. For the moment we will not think of escape. If only I can succeed in getting rid of that monster up there, and doing it in my own special way, all this will have been worth while. Do you agree?"

I most emphatically agreed, and said so. McGowan arose and led me to the other side of the cave. There I saw a small, dark opening, perhaps four feet in diameter. A tunnel! A man-made tunnel leading steeply upward through solid rock!

"For about four years we've worked on this," McGowan said with a tinge of pride in his voice. "We've hacked our way inches at a time with whatever crude implements we could smuggle here. More than a mile of solid rock lies between us and the surface, and we've gone more than three-quarters of the way already."

"But why didn't you let me in on this!" I gasped, a sudden surge of hope welling up in my throat so that I could hardly speak. I could hardly even think! My brain was churning crazily. To get out of these tunnels, to even glimpse a star again against the black night sky, or breathe fresh air once more—those were hopes that many of us had abandoned, as we gradually became living automatons and the radite ore took its insidious toll of us.

McGowan looked at me steadily and answered my question: "Because we don't trust everyone. Marnick has certain methods up there of extracting information, and if ever— Well, anyway, you've been rather a baffling entity since you came here. You still are. Right now we don't know whether to trust you, but we have to because we need you."

"But you can trust me!" I exclaimed in an excess of anxiety.

"We need you," McGowan went on coldly, "because we understand you're something of an expert with directional beam finders. We suspected that Marnick might have a network of beams raying downward, to detect any such escape attempt as this. We had to make sure, and that's why I had to get to the surface, although it meant torture. And I did find out, never mind how. He has a battery of directional beams. They won't reach through rock very far, but we can't be too careful now that we're getting near the surface. So, Reed: do you think you could detect any such beams, before we break through into them?"

"Yes, I'm sure I could," I answered, perhaps a little too eagerly.

"Good. Then you're in with us to the finish." He turned to the others. "Wilkinson—I think it's your turn tonight? Reed here will go up with you. Incidentally, you might veer a few degrees to the right; as near as I could judge, we're coming a little too close to Marnick's

quarters. And you, Reed, keep a sharp lookout for those beams."

I ENTERED the dark little tunnel behind Wilkinson, and we began the climb. He carried the lantern. It was rather precarious. The tunnel, I judged, was on a forty-five-degree angle, but wisely they had leveled out little hand and foot holds, so that we could rest occasionally.

Three-quarters of a mile, McGowan had said. It seemed more like five, but I didn't mind at all. All my weariness and sleepiness had left me now; every time I scraped a knee or elbow against the rock it was a pleasure, now that a new hope was born in me. At last we reached the top, and I cautioned Wilkinson to remain still while I tried to determine if any of the magnetic finder beams were near us. First I stripped myself to the waist, then pressed my body against the rock wall in various spots. Wilkinson watched the process curiously.

"No," I told him at last. "I can't feel a thing yet. Probably we're still too far down."

"How come you can feel those beams when other men can't?" Wilkinson asked.

So I told him the story. "Years ago I worked in one of the electrical laboratories where these beams were being developed. One day I was accidentally locked in the testing room—a small chamber where the beams were projected upon metal plates to test their intensity. Luckily for me, the beams that day were of a very low intensity, or I wouldn't be here now. But the power kept increasing by slow degrees, until I could feel the vibration tearing through every fiber of my body. At last, and just in time, I managed to attract attention. I was violently ill for weeks. But after that, I seemed to be hyper-sensitive to such beams."

Wilkinson continued digging at the rock with a small metal implement. Bit by bit the rock came out, in powdery dust and tiny chunks. I noticed that his hands were scarred and roughened from day after day of this work.

"When we first began," he explained, "we made much faster progress. But now a man can't work more than two or three hours up here, for the air gets

pretty stale. We take turns, of course, day after day. It's going to be pretty tough on you from now to the finish, because you'll have to be up here *every* day for a couple of hours. We're counting on you."

Yes, they were counting on me. Now for the first time I began to realize how much; and I began to doubt myself. I wasn't really sure that I could still detect those finder beams. It had been a long time since I had experienced it. Besides, the radite ore emanations had effected my body in that curious tingling way, just as it had very man here. So perhaps that would prevent—?

I only knew that if we ever blundered into one of those directional finder beams, which McGowan said were raying down, it would instantly set off an alarm in Marnick's quarters. I tried not to imagine what would happen after that. In a sort of panic I pressed my sweating body against the rocky wall, but all I could feel was the familiar radite-tingling crawling through my skin.

SO we worked day after day until they lengthened into weeks. My daily labor at the radite vein was almost a pleasure now as I anticipated the few hours of work that would come later in our secret tunnel. Daily I accompanied a different one of our group. I wanted to take my own turn at the digging, but McGowan wouldn't stand for this, preferring that I direct all my attention toward the detector beams.

Weeks passed and still I detected no beams.

Kueelo, I found, was sullen and silent. The other Martian, V'Narik, talked to me only on a few occasions. "I have a curious presentiment," he told me once, "that I shall never escape from here. You others, perhaps, but not me. I am with you on this only because there is nothing better to do. But if I can only reach the surface, and glimpse the stars once again—especially the redness of Mars—this will have been worth while."

The Martians are a strange race. I never could understand them. I tried to cheer V'Narik, but he only shook his head solemnly.

From the others I gradually learned

much that I had often wondered about, especially concerning Marnick. "There are various stories about him," McGowan told me once. "The one I'm inclined to believe is that Marnick incurred his hatred of men long ago, during the early years of the Mars mines. He was one of the earliest pioneers there. He brought his wife and child from Earth. He struck a rich iridium vein and worked it slowly, alone. Then certain Earth corporations stepped in, as you know. They wanted Marnick to sell but he would not. He defied them to the end, which was foolish. Well, one day Marnick came back to his mine to find his wife dead, rayed mercilessly by a heat-gun, and his young son missing, probably lost in the Martian wastes."

"You don't mean," I gasped, "that the Earth corporations would—"

"Would do a thing like that? They would hire it done. That's the way they worked in the early days, they always got what they wanted, in one way or another. Well, Marnick must have sworn a terrible vengeance then. He fought them and plagued them, for years he pirated the spaceways until the Triplanet Patrol was formed and became too strong for him."

I pondered this story. "So now," I mused, "he's come to this. As overseer of this penal planet, he must be—"

"He is assuredly insane," McGowan finished for me. "But he is still vengeful. He was never certain whether they were Martians or Earthmen who killed his loved ones—those men hired by the Earth corporation. But ever since, I believe, Marnick has had a brooding hate for both races, especially the criminal element. That's why he's devised his tortures here. That's why he laughs as he indulges in his wholesale revenge. A sort of revenge by proxy, as it were."

I was aghast as I glanced at McGowan, wondering just how close to the truth about Marnick he had come. McGowan's eyes were steel hard again with hate as he went on:

"And that's why, Reed, we must put an end to Marnick's mad reign here. He was done a terrible injustice in the past, yes; but he's had his revenge many times over, on the unfortunate men who have passed through his hands. That's why I

hate him, and that's why I shall have my own revenge, in my own way."

McGowan's face was not a thing I liked to look upon, in that moment.

THEN came the day when I felt the first detector beam. I had been wondering and doubting, but when it came it was unmistakable; a single sharp pain through every fiber of my body, like the exposed nerve of a tooth when it's unexpectedly touched; and then a strong, steady tingling utterly different from that of the radite ore.

I was with Blakely at the time. He stopped his work instantly. "We'd better go down and get McGowan," he said.

McGowan came back up with us. "What would you say, Reed? Think we're enough into that beam to have set off an alarm?"

"How close would you say we are?" I asked.

"According to my estimates, there must be at least another hundred yards of rock."

"Then I'd say we're safe. We must be on the very fringe of this beam. But if it weren't for me—"

"Yes, I know. But now your work's only beginning. We're going to have to cut parallel to the surface and get beyond range of the furthest beam before we can go up again."

McGowan was right. And this took several more weeks. We were very impatient now, but he impressed upon us the need for extreme caution. At last, however, we reached a point where I was definitely sure we were beyond the range. It had been agony for me, that constant proximity to the beams that seemed to tear at my every nerve-center; but I endured it and said nothing.

"This doesn't mean we're safe yet," McGowan cautioned us, when we began the vertical climb again. "To get near Marnick's house will be a problem in itself; he's sure to have it barricaded with beams, and we have to watch out for those two Jovian brutes of his."

I wonder if it could have been quite by chance that we broke through the surface during McGowan's turn? He must have had our distance calculated to the

very foot. I felt a sudden current of fresh night air that nearly overwhelmed me, and then I saw that he had broken through.

We simply lay there for a long while, not speaking, breathing in that intoxicating air. I had never really known how I missed it until now; never had I known that the stars could be so close and so brilliant, until I glimpsed a handful of them through those few square inches of space.

At last McGowan carefully plugged that opening with a few bits of rock. He turned to me and said: "We must wait 'til tomorrow; we will bring the others."

It seemed to me that tomorrow would never come. At last, however, our next sleep period rolled around, and we met in our secret place. McGowan held a special, final little conclave.

"There is something," he said, "that I have withheld from you until now. As you all undoubtedly know, we are not entirely abandoned here; that is to say, twice a year an official Earth ship sets down to leave supplies and take aboard the radite we have mined. And I know what most of you have been thinking: that if we can once reach the surface, and get Marnick out of the way, we can hide out until that Earth ship comes, then overpower the crew and escape."

Murmurs of approval came from the six of us, especially from the group of Earthmen.

"I'm sorry," McGowan went on, "but that's not the way the thing's going to work out."

Sounds of discontent arose.

"Because I have a better plan. The Earth ship won't arrive here for two more months. Its crew outnumber us, and they are well armed. Therefore, we won't wait for it at all; instead we'll take Marnick's own ship.

"Yes!" he exclaimed, smiling at the amazement on our faces, "he has a cruiser here. That's what I didn't want you to know until the last moment, for there is a difficulty. There are seven of us here, and the cruiser will accommodate only five at the most; it will take five across to Callisto, and there I can make connections that will mean safety for us."

WE looked blankly around at each other, and no man knew what the other was thinking. McGowan smiled in a way I did not like, as if he somehow knew which five it would be.

"Furthermore," he went on, "there will soon be eight of us. For now Elson's got to come along."

"Elson!" exclaimed a chorus of voices, mine among them.

"Yes." McGowan's eyes narrowed infinitesimally. "I haven't steered you wrong yet, have I? I've worked out this entire plan, so believe me when I say that Elson is very necessary to our endeavor."

I thought of Elson, and wondered why he was necessary. He, to put it cruelly, was the least among us; the butt of all our jokes; for even hopeless men such as we must sometimes have amusement. Elson had been here probably as long as McGowan, but he had suffered much more. Elson always seemed to suffer Marnick's wrath when the latter couldn't decide upon a more suitable victim. Elson was twisted and misshapen now, the result of a fall through the shaft, so I had heard; and he was blank-eyed and feeble-witted.

Now McGowan sent for him, and he came shuffling into our cave with a bewildered look. Tersely McGowan explained the situation. Elson smiled crookedly; he had always had a special fondness for McGowan, and obeyed him implicitly in everything.

We began the climb. An hour later we stood panting but unbowed upon the surface, staring at stars most of us had not seen in years! We were eight men, determined, but armed only with the short metal hook we had used for digging out the rock. McGowan carried it. He gestured with it to the left, as he whispered: "This way. We must be about a mile from the ravine where Marnick's located. Stay in sight of each other now, and watch your step—no noise!"

The terrain was rocky and rough; the horizon of the tiny planet seemed very near, and curved sharply down. The night was pitch black and boundless, with only the pinpoints of stars to guide us.

Hours later, it seemed, we glimpsed another pinpoint of light that was not a star. It was too low against the blackness for

that; we knew it was a light from Marnick's abode, at the entrance of a rocky little canyon perhaps a quarter of a mile away. We proceeded with infinite caution.

Suddenly, I felt that awful agony through every nerve again, and I knew we had stumbled into more of Marnick's detector beams. This time we may have blundered far enough to set off an alarm, but I didn't especially care. I fell to the ground as the warning along my nerves persisted. For a minute I was almost violently ill. Luckily, the others stopped instantly. McGowan dragged me back and waited until I had recovered.

"Our human beam detector. Lucky we've got you with us, Reed!" But there was no humor in his voice, in fact I caught a note of pity. I think he already realized, just as I was slowly beginning to—

But I shall not think of that. McGowan spoke a few words to Elson that we could not hear. Elson nodded obediently. We moved away at a sharp angle to the right, but now I noticed Elson did not accompany us.

I was still dizzy and weak, but I clenched my teeth and determined to see this thing through to the finish. I guided us away from those beams. As near as I could determine, they rayed out in a sort of semi-circular barrier, invisible, of course. Carefully we skirted the edge of it, toward the far wall of the canyon that sheltered Marnick's house. How I stayed on my feet I cannot understand, for every step was an agony as the faintest outreaches of those rays stabbed fiercely through me. The others, of course, felt nothing.

"We've got to get past it," McGowan whispered tensely to me, "or we're finished!"

I nodded curtly. I didn't know what McGowan had in mind, but I realized we had to get closer to Marnick's house. We came nearer and nearer to the canyon and then the power of the beams began to diminish. We pressed flat against the rocky walls and moved swiftly forward. Suddenly we were beyond the barrier. The squat stone dwelling was a bare fifty yards from us now, and we could see a little square of light from the side window.

WE paused there in a huddled little group, wondering what McGowan's next move would be. Apparently he was waiting for something. And a second later we knew what it was, as a ringing alarm shattered the silence! I knew it must have been Elson out there who had set it off, according to McGowan's instructions. I glanced sharply at McGowan and he seemed satisfied, as he cautioned us to silence.

Another square of light appeared and we glimpsed the tall form of Marnick in the open doorway. But he knew better than to remain there long against the light. He stepped quickly outside, but not before we glimpsed an atom-pistol in his hand.

"This is it!" McGowan whispered. "I only wanted to get him outside." We moved silently across the space toward the side of the house that hid us from Marnick. There we could peer into the lighted window. I saw a large room quite like a library, and I was amazed at how richly it was furnished, with books and tables and tapestries and a fireplace at one end. It seemed utterly incongruous here on this dark, mad planet.

But I didn't have much time to think about it. McGowan was fumbling at the window, and at last it swung silently open. "I've got to get hold of a weapon!" he whispered. "The rest of you wait here. I don't think Marnick will come around to this side, but keep a sharp lookout anyway." With that he climbed through the window and moved silently across the room.

Anxiously, I watched him, expecting Marnick to return at any moment. McGowan searched the room thoroughly, opening drawers and tumbling books in disarray, but no weapon was forthcoming. He did find a small flashlight, however, and with it in hand he moved into another dark room leading off this one, there to continue his search. He was out of my sight now, but I glimpsed his light flashing around cautiously. The seconds seemed like eternities.

I was so interested in watching the inside of the house that I had almost forgotten my companions behind me. Suddenly, I heard a muffled commotion near by, and whirled quickly around.

The two Jovians had crept silently upon us out of the darkness; perhaps Marnick, as a cautionary measure, had sent them out to scout around the house. At any rate, there was a silent struggle of bodies behind me, and all I could distinguish clearly was one of the Jovians who had seized V'Narik's neck in his two powerful hands. Blakely was standing there with the heavy metal hook upraised, and it seemed to me that he hesitated about ten seconds too long before he brought it crashing down on the Jovian's skull. But by that time V'Narik was dead, and it suddenly dawned on me that Blakely's hesitation had been deliberate; and that left only seven of us instead of eight.

The other Jovian was more than holding his own, and Blakely seemed content to watch. I seized the heavy bar from him and leaped into the *mêlée*, waiting for an opening. I brought the bar wildly down, and by pure luck it landed on the Jovian skull, crushing it like an eggshell. The others staggered weakly up.

I leaped back to the window, for I thought surely Marnick must have returned; what I didn't realize then was that scarcely a minute had yet elapsed since the alarm had sounded. But McGowan had found his weapon. He held an atom-pistol in his hand as he crossed the lighted room to the window, and climbed back out to us.

It was not until that moment that I had my curious foreboding. McGowan, if he had wanted to kill Marnick, could easily have crossed that room to the front door that was still open, and rayed Marnick down from behind. He wanted to kill Marnick all right, but in his own way. He had his own special revenge mapped out. I suddenly remembered that, and I knew that McGowan was going to carry it through.

"So far so good," he murmured as he rejoined us. He weighed the atom-pistol familiarly in his hand. "Now, if only Elson out there comes through all right—Come on, let's see where Marnick is. Not too far from the house, I hope. And remember, all of you, this is strictly my party; so no interference."

Those last words struck an ominous note in me, but I said nothing, nor did the others as we followed McGowan along

to the far corner of the house. There we could see the long, dim rectangle of light from the room streaming out onto the barren rock. Marnick was not in sight but we knew he must be somewhere very near, waiting in the darkness, watching for whoever had set off that alarm.

SEEMINGLY, for a long while we waited, but it couldn't have been more than a minute; we crowded close to each other, staring, trying to accustom our eyes to the night. Then McGowan pointed, and we saw a darker shape very near the house, and we knew it was Marnick, waiting.

Again that curious feeling of impending drama overwhelmed me, and I wanted to act to prevent something, but I didn't know how—or what—

McGowan's gesture shifted imperiously, and we saw another vague blur of a figure out there and we knew it was Elson. McGowan, in that moment, reminded me of a stage director, proud of his work and trying to impress its subtleties upon us. My gaze went back to the slouching figure of Elson, and I realized he was moving toward us.

Marnick saw him at the same time. Marnick straightened up, leaned tautly forward and seemed to be peering. Then Marnick's hated voice came stabbing through the darkness to us, but not directed at us:

"I see you out there. Whoever you are, it was foolish of you to try to come near my house, for you have set off a detector beam. Stop immediately or I will blast you. I have an atom-pistol trained on you at this moment."

For a single instant everything seemed to stand still. Elson stood still. McGowan, close beside me, caught his breath sharply in his throat. Then Elson moved forward again, and McGowan breathed a slow sigh of relief.

"Good," he murmured in my ear, though I am sure he was not conscious that I was there. "I knew Elson would obey me. Elson obeys me in everything." And then: "Poor Elson."

In that sudden moment I realized what was going to happen; I knew McGowan had planned this step by step from start to finish, and I knew *Elson was going to*

die! I started forward with a cry in my throat, but McGowan's hand clamped roughly over my mouth and his fingers dug cruelly into my arm.

I could see, though, and I saw Elson come forward in his slouching, ungainly gait, arms dangling at his side and an idiotic grin on his face. I heard Marnick's warning once more, and I saw the almost invisible beam of his atom-pistol slashing the darkness. I saw Elson stumble and plough forward on his face and lay still. And not until then did McGowan release me.

But then it was too late. Elson was dead, and I heard a sound that was almost a chuckle deep in McGowan's throat. Then his voice slashed through the darkness and I realized that here was the acme of triumph in all his years of planning:

"Drop your pistol, Marnick."

Marnick whirled toward his voice and took a tense step toward us; but McGowan's pistol rayed across the rock and slashed dangerously near Marnick's feet. Marnick's pistol dropped from his fingers with a clanging sound.

"That's better. You're a madman, Marnick, but not too mad to fail to realize when the game is over. I'm going to kill you, I want you to know that; and I want you to know who is speaking. This is McGowan. But before I kill you I want you to realize what you've done tonight. You've killed a man. Know who it is? Go take a look."

Marnick stood there hesitant. I could almost picture the indecision on his face. But McGowan's pistol rayed again, very close to his feet, and Marnick stumbled out to where Elson lay.

"Good," McGowan went on. "Now look at 'im. It's Elson, you see?" McGowan's voice seemed different now than I had ever heard it. It wasn't his voice at all. But it went on inexorably, and I felt chills chasing up and down my spine.

"Do you know who Elson really is, Marnick? No, of course, you don't. I saw to that. He came to this prison planet about the same time I did. He was tall and straight and youthful then, but somehow you couldn't stand that; you made him your special victim, you tortured and maimed him and now you've killed him. Look very closely, Marnick. You still do

not know? Then I suggest you turn him over—that's right. And I suggest you look very closely on the outer part of his left thigh. A curious blemish is there, an unmistakable birthmark. You realize now? Yes, I see that you do.

"Your son, Marnick, never died on Mars. I was one of that party of men who— Well, I don't care to think about that now. The others left him there beside his mother, thinking him dead, but I knew better. I went back and took him, and kept him with me until he was sixteen, when we parted. Perhaps he inherited some of his criminal ways from his association with me. Anyway, when I was sentenced here, and he came a little later, I knew what I must do!"

IT was a nightmare. I couldn't believe it. I glimpsed Marnick out there huddling over the body of the man he had just slain . . . his own son . . . and even at that distance and through that dimness there was something that made me feel sorry for him.

He arose very slowly, turned to face McGowan and tried to speak something but could not. He took a few faltering steps in our direction and then McGowan rayed him down. There was still a satisfied little smile on McGowan's lips as he did it. I hated McGowan in that moment as much as I had ever hated Marnick, but I could do nothing, for my mind was a little numbed.

"I waited seven years for that," McGowan said, and he breathed very deeply. Then he walked through us and strode back to where the two Jovians lay, and V'Narik.

"V'Narik's dead," he said as if he'd just discovered it. "He always had a hunch he wouldn't get away from here, didn't he? But he got to see the stars and Mars again, just as he wanted to. And Elson's dead, of course. That still leaves six of us." He looked at me significantly.

I knew what he meant. I had known

all the time that I would never set foot on Earth again, and McGowan had known it, too. "Make it five," I said, "for I'm staying."

The others didn't quite understand, and they didn't much care. They went rushing off to find Marnick's cruiser that would bear them safely to Callisto. McGowan stepped forward with that enigmatic smile on his lips, and seized my hand.

"Thanks," he said simply. "Thanks for all you've done for us, and don't hate me too much."

"Just go away," I said, "and leave me alone. I want to think. You might leave me that atom-pistol if you want to."

It is a good thing they left as quickly as they did, or I would have killed McGowan. I watched their cruiser blast up and away into the dark void. I said I wanted to think, and I have thought. And whenever I remember that terrible revenge, I must decide that McGowan was the madman, not Marnick. Perhaps they were both mad. Anyway, it does not matter any more.

I only know that I shall soon die; for my constant proximity to those detector beams in the past several weeks, in conjunction with these radite emanations, has produced a curious illness in me from which I know I should never recover. The symptoms become stronger hourly, and the agony is almost unbearable. Perhaps soon, if it continues, I shall—

But I must finish this document first. I have been writing it, here in Marnick's study, for the past twenty-four hours. I hope it will be found when the next Earth supply ship comes. I think it even likely that those other unfortunate men, in the tunnels below, will continue to work as usual until then, unknowing of what has taken place up here; for they have become automatons.

I can only hope that this document will serve, in the future, to make the fate of such men a little less severe.

Well, now I think it is finished.

CAPTAIN CHAOS

By NELSON S. BOND

The Callisto-bound *Leo* needed a cook. What it got was a piping-voiced Jonah who jinxed it straight into Chaos.

WE picked up our new cook on Phobos. Not Phoebus or Phoebe; I mean Phobos, Mars' inner moon. Our regular victual mangler came down with acute indigestion—tasted some of his own cooking, no doubt—when we were just one blast of a jet-tube out of Sand City spaceport. But since we were rocketing under sealed orders, we couldn't turn back.

So we laid the *Leo* down on Phobos' tiny cradle-field and bundled our ailing grub-hurler off to a hospital, and the skipper said to me, "Mister Dugan," he said, "go out and find us a cook!"

"Aye, sir!" I said, and went.

Only it wasn't that easy. In those days, Phobos had only a handful of settlers, and most of them had good-paying jobs. Besides, we were at war with the Outer Planets, and no man in his right senses wanted to sign for a single-trip jump on a rickety old patrolship bound for nobody-knew-where. And, of course, cooks are dime-a-dozen when you don't need one, but when you've got to locate one in a hurry they're as difficult to find as petticoats in a nudist camp.

I tried the restaurants and the employment agencies, but it was no dice. I tried the hotels and the tourist homes and even one or two of the cleaner-looking joy-joints. Again I drew a blank. So, getting desperate, I audiod a plaintive appeal to the wealthy Phobosian colonists, asking that one of the more patriotic sons-of-riches donate a chef's services to the good old I.P.S., but my only response was a loud silence.

So I went back to the ship. I said, "Sorry, sir. We're up against it. I can't seem to find a cook on the whole darned satellite."

The skipper scowled at me from under a corduroy brow and fumed, "But we've got to have a cook, Dugan! We can't go on without one!"

"In a pinch," I told him, "I might be able to boil a few pies, or scramble us a steak or something, Skipper."

"Thanks, Dugan, but that won't do. On this trip the men must be fed regularly and well. Makeshift meals are O.Q. on an ordinary run, but when you're running the blockade—"

He stopped abruptly. But too late; I had caught his slip of the tongue. I stared at him. I said, "The blockade, sir? Then you've read our orders?"

The Old Man nodded soberly.

"Yes. You might as well know, Lieutenant. Everyone will be told as soon as the *Leo* lifts gravas again. My orders were to be opened four hours after leaving Sand City. I read them a few minutes ago.

"We are to attempt to run the Outer Planets Alliance blockade at any spot which reconnaissance determines as favorable. Our objective is Jupiter's fourth satellite, Callisto. The Solar Federation Intelligence Department has learned of a loyalist uprising on that moon. It is reported that Callisto is weary of the war, with a little prompting will secede from the Alliance and return to the Federation.

"If this is true, it means we have at last found the foothold we have been seeking; a salient within easy striking distance of Jupiter, capital of the Alliance government. Our task is to verify the rumor and, if it be true, make a treaty with the Callistans."

I said, "Sweet howling stars—some assignment, sir! A chance to end this terrible war . . . form a permanent union of the entire Solar family . . . bring about a new age of prosperity and happiness."

"If," Cap O'Hara reminded me, "we succeed. But it's a tough job. We can't expect to win through the enemy cordon unless our men are in top physical condition. And that means a sound, regular diet. So we must find a cook, or—"



Illustrated by Lynch

In the unbelievable shambles, two of the cruisers collided.

"The search," interrupted an oddly high-pitched, but not unpleasant voice, "is over. Where's the galley?"

I WHIRLED, and so did the Old Man. Facing us was an outlandish little figure; a slim, trim, natty little Earthman not more than five-foot-two in height; a smooth-cheeked young fellow swaddled in a spaceman's uniform at least three sizes too large. Into the holster of his harness was thrust a Haemholtz ray-pistol big enough to burn an army, and in his right hand he brandished a huge, gleaming carving-knife. He frowned at us impatiently.

"Well," he repeated impatiently, "where is it?"

The Old Man stared.

"W-who," he demanded dazedly, "might you be?"

"I might be," retorted the little stranger, "lots of people. But I came here to be your new cook."

O'Hara said, "The new—What's your name, mister?"

"Andy," replied the newcomer. "Andy Laney."

The Old Man's lip curled speculatively. "Well, Andy Laney," he said, "you don't look like much of a cook to me."

But the little mugg just returned the Old Man's gaze coolly. "Which makes it even," he retorted. "*You* don't look like much of a skipper to me. Do I get the job, or don't I?"

The captain's grin faded, and his jowls turned pink. I stepped forward hastily. I said, "Excuse me, sir, shall I handle this?" Then, because the skipper was still struggling for words: "*You*," I said to the little fellow, "are a cook?"

"One of the best!" he claimed complacently.

"You're willing to sign for a blind journey?"

"Would I be here," he countered, "if I weren't?"

"And you have your space certificate?"

"I—" began the youngster.

"Smart Aleck!" That was the Old Man, exploding into coherence at last. "Rat-tailed, clever-cracking little smart Aleck! Don't look like much of a skipper, eh? Well, my fine young rooster—"

"I said quickly, "If you don't mind, sir,

this is no time to worry over trifles. 'Any port in a storm,' you know. And if this young man *can* cook—"

The skipper's color subsided. So did he, grumbling. "Well, perhaps you're right, Dugan. All right, Slops, you're hired. The galley's on the second level, port side. Mess in three quarters of an hour. Get going! Dugan, call McMurtrie and tell him we lift graves immediately—*Slops!* What are you doing at that table?"

For the little fellow had sidled across the control-room and now, eyes gleaming inquisitively, was peering at our trajectory charts. At the skipper's roar he glanced up at us eagerly.

"Vestal!" he piped in that curiously high-pitched and mellow voice. "Loft trajectory for Vesta! Then we're trying to run the Alliance blockade, Captain?"

"None of your business!" bellowed O'Hara in tones of thunderous outrage. "Get below instantly, or by the lavender lakes of Luna I'll—"

"If I were you," interrupted our diminutive new chef thoughtfully, "I'd try to broach the blockade off Iris rather than Vesta. For one thing, their patrol line will be thinner there; for another, you can come in through the Meteor Bog, using it as a cover."

"Mr. Dugan!"

The Old Man's voice had an ominous ring to it, one I had seldom heard. I sprang to attention and saluted smartly. "Aye, sir?"

"Take this—this culinary tactician out of my sight before I forget I'm an officer and a gentleman. And tell him that when I want advice I'll come down to the galley for it!"

A hurt look crept into the youngster's eyes. Slowly he turned and followed me from the turret, down the ramp, and into the pan-lined cubicle which was his proper headquarters. When I was turning to leave he said apologetically, "I didn't mean any harm, Mr. Dugan. I was just trying to help."

"You must learn not to speak out of turn, youngster," I told him sternly. "The Old Man's one of the smartest space navigators who ever lifted graves. He doesn't need the advice or suggestions of a cook."

"But I was raised in the Belt," said the

little chap plaintively. "I know the Bog like a book. And I was right; our safest course is by way of Iris."

Well, there you are! You try to be nice to someone, and what happens? He tees off on you. I got a little sore I guess. Anyhow, I told the little squirt off, but definitely.

"Now, listen!" I said bluntly. "You volunteered for the job. Now you've got to take what comes with it: orders! From now on, suppose you take care of the cooking and let the rest of us worry about the ship—Captain Slops!"

And I left, banging the door behind me hard.

SO we hit the spaceways for Vesta, and after a while the Old Man called up the crew and told them our destination, and if you think they were scared or nervous or anything like that, why, you just don't know spacemen. From oil-soaked old Jock McMurtrie, the Chief Engineer, all the way down the line to Willy, our cabin-boy, the *Leo's* complement was as thrilled as a sub-deb at an Academy hop.

John Wainwright, our First Officer, licked his chops like a fox in a hen-house and said, "The blockade! Oboyoboy! Maybe we'll tangle with one of the Alliance ships, hey?"

Blinky Todd, an ordinary with highest rating, said with a sort of macabre satisfaction, "I hopes we *do* meet up with 'em, that's whut I does, sir! Never did have no love for them dirty, skulkin' Outlanders, that's whut I didn't!"

And one of the black-gang blasters, a taciturn chap, said nothing—but the grim set of his jaw and the purposeful way he spat on his callused paws were mutely eloquent.

Only one member of the crew was absent from the conclave. Our new Slops. He was busy preparing midday mess, it seems, because scarcely had the skipper finished talking than the audio hummed and a cheerful call rose from the galley:

"Soup's on! Come and get it!"

Which we did. And whatever failings "Captain Slops" might have, he had not exaggerated when he called himself one of the best cooks in space. That meal, children, was a meal! When it comes to

victuals I can destroy better than describe, but there was stuff and things and such-life, all smothered in gravy and so on, and huge quantities of this and that and the other thing, all of them unbelievably dee-luscious!

Beyond a doubt it was the finest feast we of the *Leo* had enjoyed in a 'coon's age. Even the Old Man admitted that as, leaning back from the table, he patted the pleasant bulge due south of his belt buckle. He rang the bell that summoned Slops from the galley, and the little fellow came bustling in apprehensively.

"Was everything all right, sir?" he asked.

"Not only all right, Slops," wheezed Captain O'Hara, "but perfect! Accept my congratulations on a superb meal, my boy. Did you find everything O.Q. in the galley?"

"Captain Slops" blushed like a stereo-struck school-gal, and fidgeted from one foot to another.

"Oh, thank you, sir! Thank you very much. Yes, the galley was in fine order. That is—" He hesitated—"there is one little thing, sir."

"So? Well, speak up, son, what is it? I'll get it fixed for you right away." The Old Man smiled archly. "Must have everything shipshape for a tip-top chef, what?"

The young hash-slinger still hesitated bashfully.

"But it's such a *little* thing, sir, I almost hate to bother you with it."

"No trouble at all. Just say the word."

"Well, sir," confessed Slops reluctantly, "I need an incinerator in the galley. The garbage-disposal system in there now is old-fashioned, inconvenient and unsanitary. You see, I have to carry the waste down two levels to the rocket-chamber in order to expel it."

The skipper's brow creased.

"I'm sorry, Slops," he said, "but I don't see how we can do anything about that. Not just now, at any rate. That job requires equipment we don't have aboard. After this jump is over I'll see what I can do."

"Oh, I realize we don't have the regular equipment," said Slops shyly, "but I've figured out a way to get the same effect with equipment we do have. There's an old Nolan heat-cannon rusting in the store-

room. If that could be installed by the galley vent, I could use it as an incinerator."

I said, "Hold everything, Slops! You can't do that! It's against regulations. Code 44, Section xvi, says, 'Fixed armament shall be placed only in gunnery embrasures insulated against the repercussions of firing charges, re-radiation, or other hazards accruent to heavy ordnance.'"

Our little chef's face fell. "Now, that's too bad," he said discouragedly. "I was planning a special banquet for tomorrow, with roast marsh-duck and all the fixings, pinberry pie—but, oh, well!—if I have no incinerator—"

The skipper's eyes bulged, and he drooled like a pup at a barbeque. He was a bit of a sybarite, was Captain David O'Hara; if there was anything he dearly loved to exercise his molars on it was Venusian marsh-duck topped with a dessert of Martian pinberry pie. He said:

"We-e-ell, now, Mr. Dugan, let's not be too technical. After all, that rule was put in the book only to prevent persons which shouldn't ought to do so from having control of ordnance. But that isn't what Slops wants the cannon for, is it, son? So I don't see any harm in rigging up the old Nolan in the galley for incineration purposes. Did you say *all* the fixings, Slops?"

Maybe I was mistaken, but for a moment I suspected I caught a queer glint in our little chef's eyes; it might have been gratitude, or, on the other hand, it might have been self-satisfaction. Whatever it was it passed quickly, and Captain Slops' soft voice was smooth as silk when he said:

"Yes, Captain, all the fixings. I'll start cooking the meal as soon as the new incinerator is installed."

SO that was that. During the night I watch two men of the crew lugged the ancient Nolan heat-cannon from stores and I went below to check. I found young Slops bent over the old cannon, giving it a strenuous and thorough cleaning. The way he was oiling and scrubbing at that antique reminded me of an apprentice gunner codling his first charge.

I must have startled him, entering unexpectedly as I did, for when I said, "Hi,

there!" he jumped two feet and let loose a sissy little piping squeal. Then, crimson-faced with embarrassment, he said, "Oh, h-hello, Lieutenant. I was just getting my new incinerator shipshape. Looks O.Q., eh?"

"If you ask me," I said, "it looks downright lethal. The Old Man must be off his gravs to let a young chuckle-head like you handle that toy."

"But I'm only going to use it," he said plaintively, "to dispose of garbage."

"Well, don't dump your cans when there are any ships within range," I warned him glumly, "or there'll be a mess of human scraps littering up the void. That gun may be a museum piece, but it still packs a wallop."

"Yes, sir," said Slops meekly. "I'll be careful how I use it, sir."

I had finished my inspection, and I sniggered as his words reminded me of a joke I'd heard at a spacemans' smoker.

"Speaking of being careful, did you hear the giggler about the old maid at the Martian baths? Well, it seems this perennial spinster wandered, by accident, into the men's shower room and met up with a brawny young prospector—"

Captain Slops said, "Er—excuse me, Lieutenant, but I have to get this marsh-duck stuffed."

"Plenty of time, Slops. Wait till you hear this; it will kill you. The old maid got flustered and said, 'Oh, I'm sorry! I must be in the wrong compartment—'"

"If you don't mind, Mr. Dugan," interrupted the cook loudly, "I'm awfully busy. I don't have any time for—"

"The prospector looked her over carefully for a couple of seconds; then answered, 'That's O.Q. by me, sister. I won't—'"

"I—I've got to go now, Lieutenant," shouted Slops. "Just remembered something I've got to get from stores." And without even waiting to hear the wallop at the end of my tale he fled from the galley, very pink and flustered.

So there was one for the log-book! Not only did our emergency chef lack a sense of humor, but the little punk was bashful, as well! Still, it was no skin off my nose if Slops wanted to miss the funniest yarn of a decade. I shrugged and went back to the control turret.

ALL that, to make an elongated story brief, happened on the first day out of Mars. As any schoolchild knows, it's a full hundred million from the desert planet to the asteroid belt. In those days, there was no such device as a Velocity-Intensifier unit, and the *Leo*, even though she was then considered a reasonably fast little patroller, muddled along at a mere 400,000 m.p.h. Which meant it would take us at least ten days, perhaps more, to reach that disputed region of space around Vesta, where the Federation outposts were sparse and the Alliance block began.

That period of jetting was a mingled joy and pain in the britches. Captain Slops was responsible for both.

For one thing, as I've hinted before, he was a bit of a panty-waist. It wasn't so much the squeaky voice or the effeminate gestures he cut loose with from time to time. One of the roughest, toughest scoundrels who ever cut a throat on Venus was "High G" Gordon, who talked like a boy soprano, and the meanest pirate who ever highjacked a freighter was "Runt" Hake—who wore diamond ear-rings and gold fingernail polish!

But it was Slops' general attitude that isolated him from the command and crew. In addition to being a most awful prude, he was a kill-joy. When just for a lark we begged him to boil us a pot of spaghetti, so we could pour a cold worm's nest into Rick Bramble's bed, he shuddered and refused.

"Certainly not!" he piped indignantly. "You must be out of your minds! I never heard of such a disgusting trick! Of course, I won't be a party to it. Worms—Ugh!"

"Yeah!" snorted Johnny Wainwright disdainfully, "And *ugh!* to you, too. Come on, Joe, let's get out of here before we give Slops bad dreams and goose-flesh!"

Nor was hypersensitiveness Slops' worst failing. If he was squeamish about off-color jokes and such stuff, he had no compunctions whatsoever against sticking his nose in where it didn't belong.

He was an inveterate prowler. He snooped everywhere and anywhere from ballast-bins to bunk-rooms. He quizzed the Chief about engine-room practices, the gunner's mate on problems of ballistics, even the cabin-boy on matters of supplies

and distribution of same. He was not only an asker; he was a teller, as well. More than once during the next nine days he forced on the skipper the same gratuitous advice which before had enraged the Old Man. By sheer perseverance he earned the title I had tagged him with: "Captain Slops."

I was willing to give him another title, too—Captain Chaos. God knows he created enough of it!

"It's a mistake to broach the blockade at Vesta," he argued over and over again.

"O.Q., Slops," the skipper would nod agreeably, with his mouth full of some temper-softening tidbit, "you're right and I'm wrong, as you usually are. But I'm in command of the *Leo*, and you ain't. Now, run along like a good lad and bring me some more of this salad.

So ten days passed, and it was on the morning of the eleventh day out of Sand City that we ran into trouble with a capital trub. I remember that morning well, because I was in the mess-hall having breakfast with Cap O'Hara, and Slops was playing another variation on the old familiar theme.

"I glanced at the chart this morning, sir," he began as he minced in with a platterful of golden flapjacks and an ewer of Vermont maple syrup, "and I see we are but an hour or two off Vesta. I am very much afraid this is our last chance to change course—"

"And for that," chuckled the Old Man, "Hooray! Pass them pancakes, son. Maybe now you'll stop shooting off about how we ought to of gone by way of Iris. Mmmm! Good!"

"Thank you, sir," said Slops mechanically. "But you realize there is extreme danger of encountering enemy ships?"

"Keep your pants on, Slops!"

"Eh?" The chef looked startled. "Beg pardon, sir?"

"I said keep your pants on. Sure, I know. And I've took precautions. There's a double watch on duty, and men at every gun. If we do meet up with an Alliance craft, it'll be just too bad for them!

"Yes, sirree!" The Old Man grinned comfortably. "I almost hope we do bump into one. After we burn it out of the void we'll have clear sailing all the way to Callisto."

"But—but if there should be more than one, sir?"

"Don't be ridiculous, my boy. Why should there be?"

"Well, for one thing," wrangled our pint-sized cook, "because rich ekalastron deposits were recently discovered on Vesta. For another, because Vesta's orbit is now going into aphelion stage, which will favor a concentration of raiders."

The skipper choked, spluttered, and disgorged a bite of half-masticated pancake.

"Eka—Great balls of fire! Are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure. I told you days ago that I was born and raised in the Belt, Captain."

"I know. But why didn't you tell me about Vesta before? I mean about the ekalastron deposits?"

"Why—why, because—" said Slops. "Because—"

"Don't give me lady-logic, you dope!" roared the Old Man, an enraged lion now, his breakfast completely forgotten. "Give me a sensible answer! If you'd told me *that* instead of just yipping and yapping about how via Iris was a nicer route I'd have listened to you! As it is, we're blasting smack-dab into the face of danger. And us on the most vital mission of the whole ding-busted war!"

He was out of his seat, bustling to the audio, buzzing Lieutenant Wainwright on the bridge.

"Johnny—that you? Listen, change traj quick! Set a new course through the Belt by way of Iris and the Bog, and hurry up, because—"

What reason he planned to give I do not know, for he never finished that sentence. At that moment the *Leo* rattled like a Model AA spacesled in an ionic storm, rolled, quivered and slewed like a drunk on a freshly-waxed floor. The motion needed no explanation; it was unmistakable to any spacer who has ever hopped the blue. Our ship had been gripped, and was now securely locked, in the clutch of a tractor beam!

WHAT happened next was everything at once. Officers Wainwright and Bramble were in the turret, and they were both good sailors. They knew their duties and how to perform them. An instant

after the *Leo* had been assaulted, the ship bucked and slithered again, this time with the repercussions of our own ordnance. Over the audio, which Sparks had hastily converted into an all-way, inter-ship communicating unit, came a jumble of voices. A call for Captain O'Hara to "Come to the bridge, sir!" . . . the harsh query of Chief McMurtrie, "Tractor beams on stern and prow, sir. Shall I attempt to break them?" . . . and a thunderous *groooooom!* from the fore gunnery port as a crew went into action . . . a plaintive little shriek from somebody . . . maybe from Slops himself. . . .

Then on an ultra-wave carrier, drowning local noises beneath waves of sheer volume, came English words spoken with a foreign intonation. The voice of the Alliance commander.

"Ahoj the *Leo!* Calling the captain of the *Leo!*"

O'Hara, his great fists knotted at his sides, called back, "O'Hara of the *Leo* answering. What do you want?"

"Stand by to admit a boarding party, Captain. It is futile to resist. You are surrounded by six armed craft, and your vessel is locked in our tensiles. Any further effort to make combat will bring about your immediate destruction!"

From the bridge, topside, snarled Johnny Wainwright, "The hell with 'em, Skipper! Let's fight it out!" And elsewhere on the *Leo* angry voices echoed the same defiance. Never in my life had I felt such a heart-warming love for and pride in my companions as at that tense moment. But the Old Man shook his head, and his eyes were glistening.

"It's no use," he moaned strickenly, more to himself than to me. "I can't sacrifice brave men in a useless cause, Dugan. I've got to—" He faced the audio squarely. To the enemy commander he said, "Very good, sir! In accordance with the Rules of War, I surrender into your hands!"

The firing ceased, and a stillness like that of death blanketed the *Leo*.

It was then that Andy Laney, who had lingered in the galley doorway like a frozen figuring, broke into babbling incredulous speech.

"You—you're giving up like this?" he bleated. "Is this all you're going to do?"

The Old Man just looked at him, saying never a word, but that glance would have blistered the hide off a Mercurian steelback. I'm more impetuous. I turned on the little idiot vituperatively.

"Shut up, you fool! Don't you realize there's not a thing we can do but surrender? Dead, we're of no earthly use to anyone. Alive, there is always a chance one of us may get away, bring help. We have a mission to fulfil, an important one. Corpses can't run errands."

"But—but if they take us prisoners," he questioned fearfully, "what will they do with us?"

"A concentration camp somewhere. Perhaps on Vesta."

"And the *Leo*?"

"Who knows? Maybe they'll send it to Jupiter with a prize crew in command."

"That's what I thought. But they mustn't be allowed to do that! We're marked with the Federation tricolor!"

A sharp retort trembled on the tip of my tongue, but I never uttered it. Indeed, I swallowed it as comprehension dawned. There came to me the beginnings of respect for little Andy Laney's wisdom. He had been right about the danger of the Vesta route, as we had learned to our cost; now he was right on this other score.

The skipper got it, too. His jaw dropped. He said, "Heaven help us, it's the truth! To reach Jupiter you've got to pass Callisto. If the Callistans saw a Federation vessel, they'd send out an emissary to greet it. Our secret would be discovered, Callisto occupied by the enemy. . . ."

I think he would have turned, then, and given orders to continue the fight even though it meant suicide for all of us. But it was too late. Already our lock had opened to the attackers; down the metal ramp we now heard the crisp cadence of invading footsteps. The door swung open, and the Alliance commandant stood smiling triumphantly before us.

THERE are soldiers and soldiers. Fighting men, as a rule, are pretty decent guys at the core. Having experienced danger, violence and the crawling horror of death themselves, they know the meaning of mercy. They respect their foes, and extend a fine magnanimity in the moment of victory.

Lieutenant-Colonel Ras Thuul, commander of the Third Outer Planets' Alliance Flotilla, was not this type of enemy. Half-breed spawn of a Jovian tribal priestess and a renegade Earthman, he retained the worst characteristics bequeathed by each of his parents.

From his father he had inherited height—he towered a full head above the squat, gnarled Jovian "runts" he led—and a festering hatred of the planet Earth. From his priestess mother he had suckled the milk of sadistic savagery which typified Jovian civilization before space-spanning Earthlings carried enlightenment to the far-flung sisterhood of the Sun.

His first words demonstrated clearly how slender was the mercy we might expect at his hands. To Captain O'Hara he said coldly, bluntly, rudely, "Your sidearms, Captain!" Then as the Old Man silently proffered his personal weapons: "You will walk before me, sir, on a tour of inspection. You might advise your men I hold you as hostage. One hostile move from any source means your death."

The skipper's reply was richly disdainful.

"I have surrendered myself to you under the Rules of War, Colonel. This play-acting is childish and altogether unnecessary."

Ras Thuul's swarthy cheeks swallowed; he took a swift step forward and, before one could guess his intention, slapped the Old Man viciously across the mouth with his gauntlet. The heavy, asbestos-lined space-glove cut and bruised; a thin trickle of blood split the skipper's lips.

"One in your position," snarled the invader, "should learn not to insult his betters! Now, lead the way, Captain. There is much to be done, and no time to waste."

Thus began our painful journey through the conquered *Leo*. As Ras Thuul had said, there was much to be done by his forces—nor had they delayed in getting about their task. A laboring crew was busily engaged in stripping the food-stuffs from our supply bins, other workmen were dismantling all hypo and radio equipment, verifying our belief that the O.P.A. was desperately in need of such material. Grim-faced Jovians had herded our marksmen from the gun embrasures, and were quickly dismantling every piece of ordnance the *Leo* boasted.

From room to room we went, from passage to sector to cabin. Nothing escaped the eagle eye of our foe. By word and sign he designated to his henchmen those items which were to be removed, those which were to be destroyed. Only in the control-room was everything left untouched. It was here that Ras Thuul volunteered the explanation which proved the depths of his infamy. With a grin of sheer savagery he explained:

"I find it needless to waste energy in smashing this equipment, Captain. I am sure the rocky fragments of the Bog will do that most efficiently."

The Old Man stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"You—you mean you're going to wreck the *Leo* in the Bog? Just turn it loose and let the grindstone smash it?"

Ras Thuul shrugged. "It is the easiest way."

"But—" puzzled the skipper confusedly—"how about us? I mean, are you going to take us aboard your ship, or do we get camped on one of the asteroids, or—"

The half-breed shrugged negligently. "Why, Captain, you wouldn't want to desert your ship? I've always heard you Earthmen made it a point of honor to stand by your decks. Of course I would not think of forbidding you this signal honor."

The skipper's face turned white, but it was not fear that drained his cheeks of color; it was righteous rage. His words exploded like a fused hypatomic.

"What! You dare do a thing like this, Colonel! You accepted my surrender under military covenant—"

"That will do, Captain!" rapped Ras Thuul. "It will do you no good to prate of technicalities. I acknowledge but one rule of war—destroy your enemy! When this vessel has been stripped of its fuel and supplies, I shall turn it loose in the Bog. What happens then to it—or you—is none of my concern. Your pleas are vain, sir!"

"And now, have we seen the entire ship?"

It was his selection of the word "pleas" that ended the Old Man's protestations. O'Hara needed no microscope to read our adversary's character; he knew that Ras Thuul would enjoy nothing more than

listening to pleas for mercy. If we had to die, we could at least die like men. His jaw clamped forever on argument.

"We have," he said. "We are now where we started."

AND so we were, back in the Officers' Mess. A half hour ago our troubles had begun here; now they threatened to end abruptly and, for us, horribly.

But the half-breed's eyes had narrowed. A liar and dastard himself, he had a liar's distrust for everyone else. He nodded toward the closed door on the farther wall.

"We haven't been in there. Where does that lead?"

I said caustically, "No, and there's one mouse-trap you haven't crawled into yet, too. What's the matter? Got a tape-worm? That's just the kitchen."

It sounds right daring now that I see it in writing, but it was pure braggadocio. I figured my number was up, and a few healthy insults wouldn't make me die any deadlier. But our captor paid no attention. Prodding Captain O'Hara before him, he pushed into the galley.

Of course Captain Slops was on duty. The little guy was a study in technicolor; sort of pink around the eyebrows, white around the lips, and green around the gills. But I had to hand it to him, he was a game little fighting cock. Never a cringe for the Jovian commander, who brushed by him to peer about the cook-house, and though the runt warriors had taken his massive old Haemholtz when they stripped us all, I saw he had a very large, and a very sharp, cleaver hanging not too far from his grasp.

Naturally, there wasn't anything for our foe to find in the galley. But he went through all the motions, just the same. Squinted in the stove, the refrigerator, the vegetable bins. And finally—

"Ah, ha!" rasped he. "What have we here?" A cannon! So, Captain O'Hara—a concealed weapon, eh? Sergeant—"

He wheeled to one of his subalterns. But Andy Laney stepped forward awkwardly.

"It—er—it's not really a cannon, sir," he piped. "If you'll just open the breech, sir, you'll see—Oh! Do be careful, sir! Oh, my goodness!"

Because Lieutenant-Colonel Ras Thuul had hurled open the breech, and the incinerator-cannon was full—or had been a moment before. Now it was half empty, and the accumulation of slops and refuse as yet unincinerated had dumped backwards all over him!

It was the one bright spot in an otherwise dull day. Thuul howled and belowed, and that was a mistake because his mouth opened. Then he spluttered. And gagged. And coughed. And backed, slipping and sliding on cold gravy, away from the incinerator. He wasn't the impressive figure he had been ten minutes ago. Coffee-grounds mottled his gold tunic, and lima beans tangled coyly with his once-gleaming epaulets. Potato-peelings draped gracefully from his ears, and the exotic odor of a slightly antique egg exuded from his shirt-front.

Well, what would you do? Even if you knew your life was in danger, what would you do at such a moment?

The same as we did, of course. We laughed. The Old Man and I, we burst out in a guffaw and rocked till we almost split our surcingle. And Slops laughed, too, in that piping little squeal of his, though even through his laughter he was gasping spasmodically, "I—I tried to warn you, sir. I'm *so* sorry! But you see it's only a garbage incinerator."

But he who laughs last, laughs last. And if our foe had been despicable before, he was a raging fury now. He did not even stop to scrape the last clinging turnip-top from his jacket. He spun to his subordinates and screamed, "Come! We are finished here! Back to our ship! I'll show these Earthmen one does not insult a Jovian commander with impunity!"

And his face a thundercloud of wrath, he dashed from the galley. We heard him calling his men, heard them exiting through the airlock, and then—silence again.

It was then, his paroxysms of mirth stifled by sober recollection, that the Old Man turned and said, "Well, it was fun while it lasted. But it's all over now, Dugan. Call the men together. This is the last act, and we might as well all face it together."

But before I could leave the room, Slops clutched my arm with fingers tense and hot as live wires.

"No, Joey! Don't go! I need your help. And yours, Skipper! Hurry! We haven't a minute to lose!"

I stared at the Old Man and he at me. "H-huh?" said the two of us. "Help? Help for what?"

"Oh, don't *talk* so much!" bleated Andy. "*Work!* Get this garbage out of here—like this!"

And recklessly he plunged both arms into the channel of the incinerator, recklessly hurled it about the previously immaculate floor of the galley. As he worked, he panted: "An incinerator, yes . . . but . . . it was a good cannon . . . in its . . . day. It will still work. I cleaned . . . and oiled it . . . and connected it to the charger. *It still shoots!*

Shoots! That was all we had to hear. We fell all over ourselves trying to get an armload of that goo. I never thought I'd live to see the day I'd go fond and blissful over a gallon of boiled noodles, but that's just what happened. I dug in, and so did the skipper. In less time than I've taken to tell it, we had that incinerator-cannon empty, swabbed out and ready for use as a cannon-incinerator.

Then the captain clapped a hand to his forehead.

"Omigawd—I clean forgot! The firing-plate! There ain't no vision-field for this gun!"

"Oh, yes there is!" cried Captain Slops. "Over your head, there—the galley-vent. I—I removed the atmosphere-duct and installed a vision-field. Use the crossed wires for a target centering device."

I flung open the vent. As he had said, the vent had been converted into a perfect firing-plate. There before me, a fat and gladsome target, was the largest of the enemy ships which had captured us, the flagship of Ras Thuul's fleet. As I watched, I saw the commander and his boarding party re-enter their own craft.

I said grimly, "Well, it's six against one. They'll blast us out of space, but by the purple gods of Pluto, we'll take at least one of them with us. This thing is connected?"

And I reached for the trigger. But once again Slops held my hand.

"No, Joey! There's a fighting chance we can get *all* of them. Wait till they cut the tractor beams and we're free of them. Then turn the cannon *upward* toward the Belt—"

"Upward?" I repeated dazedly. It didn't make sense. I glanced outside to make sure. Here was the situation. The planetoid Vesta lay about a mile or so below us. Larger than most of the meteoric and planetesimal fragments that comprise the Belt, its orbit was irregular. The smaller hunks of rock—and of course when you talk about "smaller" asteroids that means shards ranging anywhere from a yard to several miles in diameter, with weights ranging from a hundred pounds to twice that many thousands of tons—were whirling and swirling *above* our ships in a tight, lethal little huddle. That, of course, was the *melee* into which Ras Thuul planned to plunge us after he cut his tractor beams.

SURPRISINGLY, it was O'Hara who seconded Andy Laney.

"Do what he says, Joe. I don't know exactly what he has in mind, but it's his pigeon. He's steered us right this far; we might as well go whole-hog."

"Thank you, Captain!" said Slops gratefully. And as he spoke the words, the *Leo* rocked violently. With gathering speed we began to move away from our erstwhile captors, their tractor beams now released. Upward we surged toward the web-work of flailing missiles that spelled pure destruction.

"Now, Joey!" almost screamed Slops. "Aim the cannon at the rubble. Hold it firm. Full strength!"

And I did. I yanked the controls over to full power and aimed the heat-gun straight into the heart of the rubble. The radiation was invisible, of course. Our enemies couldn't know we had an operative weapon. I held it for seconds which dragged like centuries. Nearer we were hurtling toward doom, nearer and nearer.

I cried, "Nothing's happening, Skipper! We're going to crash in a minute. I might as well turn the gun on one of their ships—"

"Hold it!" shrieked Captain Slops. "It's working as I hoped. Hold it steady, Joey!"

And now, returning my gaze to the target, I saw what he meant. Something strange and weird was happening—not to us or to the enemy spacecraft, but to the Bog itself! Like a huge, churning kettle it was seething, rolling, boiling! And even as I cried aloud my astonishment, one of the tinier bits of matter plummeted *down* from the overhanging canopy of death to rattle against the hull of Ras Thuul's flagship.

Then another . . . and another . . . and then a large piece. A hunk of rock which must have weighed half a ton. It struck one of the Jovian vessels like a sledgehammer, and a huge gap split in the spaceship's seams. There came signs of frenzied activity from aboard the enemy boat; fire spurted from stern-jets as engineers hurriedly warmed their rockets.

We saw two warships, desperately trying to get under way, ram each other head on. Three more were crushed, beaten shapeless, by the tons of stony metal that smashed their very girders. The last, Ras Thuul's flagship, met its doom most horribly. It was caught as in a vise between two mountainous boulders which rolled tangentially over it. When they separated, all that remained of a once proud ship was a flattened, lacerated shred of tortured steel.

It was then, and then only, that Slops said to me:

"That's all, Joey. You can turn it off now." There was something akin to sadness in his voice. I understood. I didn't feel any too good myself, watching those Jovians, foes though they were, die so frightfully. "Captain O'Hara, if we can repair the damage done by the marauders, we can now go on to Callisto and complete our mission. I—What's the matter, Captain?"

Cap O'Hara was glaring at his little finger irately.

"Matter? Why, confound it, I cut myself on that tin can. Look at this!"

He thrust before our noses a pudgy paw, the pinky of which was leaking very feebly. I chuckled. Not so Slops; he loosed one horrified gasp, and—

"Blood!" he screamed. "Oh, gracious, I simply can't *stand* the sight of blood! Oooooohh!"

His face went suddenly white. And—

just like that!—Captain Slops fainted dead away!

The skipper said, "Well, I'll be damned!" Dazed, he knelt beside the little fellow, fumbled at his jacket collar. "Ain't that the funniest you ever saw, Dugan? Sees six ships scuttled without batting an eyelash, and passes out at seeing a pinprick! Aw, well, it's probably shock more than anything else. I'll unloose his shirt, give him a little air—"

I said, "He's the queerest guy I ever met. But he's a *man*, Skipper."

Then a funny thing happened. The Skipper, strangely scarlet of face, rose suddenly from Andy's side. He croaked, "You—you wouldn't like to lay a little bet on that, Dugan?"

"Huh?" I said. "On what? I don't understand—"

The Old Man moaned softly.

"Neither do I, Dugan. But you were wrong! Slops, here, ain't no man at all, and never was! He—*he's a girl!*"

WELL, looking back on it now I can see how we should have realized it from the beginning. Sure, Captain Slops was a girl! That high, mellow voice . . . the oversized uniform coat . . . that prudishness which was not prudishness at all, but understandable modesty.

Later, as we were streaking the spaceways toward our Callisto rendezvous, the *Leo* completely repaired, we demanded and received an explanation. I might add that in female togs the pint-sized chef looked just the right size, and a hundred percent O.Q.

"I didn't exactly lie about my name," she explained. "It is 'Andy Laney'—only you spell it a bit differently. I am really 'Ann Delaney.' My father was a spaceman, so was my grandfather and my great-grandfather. Daddy was always sorry he had a daughter instead of a son. He wanted to see the old tradition of a 'Delaney in space' go on. But you thick-headed males have rules against allowing women to take to the spaceways except as passengers, so there was nothing I could do."

"You," I told her admiringly, "did all right."

"More than all right!" acknowledged the Skipper. "If it hadn't been for you—Don't worry, Miss Delaney. I'll see that the proper authorities hear all about this. Only—" A crease puckered his forehead—"There's something I ain't yet puzzled out. How come you ordered Mr. Dugan to shoot not at, but above the ships? At the Bog? And how come the rocks came tumbling down thataway?"

"Why," smiled Ann Delaney shyly, "it was really very simple. Heat, Captain."

"Heat?"

"Of course. As any student of thermodynamics knows, heat has a definite attractive force, varying directly as the difference in temperature. Space, being a vacuum, lacks heat entirely. Its temperature is that of Absolute Zero. Our gun emitted a heat-force equivalent to that of ten solar degrees. Thus the radiation we discharged at the bitter cold fragments of rock and ore comprising the Bog created a sort of passageway, an attractive channel down which the detritus was drawn. To state the problem more simply: have you ever watched a pot of beans boil? A seething whirlpool is created; the beans seek the heat."

"By golly!" said O'Hara. "I think you got something there, Miss Delaney. Why—why, that's terrific! That gives us a brand-new combat technique for locations where there are small cosmic bodies. Wait till the War Department hears it!"

But Ann Delaney just sniffed.

"New?" she repeated disdainfully. "New? Why, every woman cook knows that, Captain!"

You'll find the rest in the history books. Callisto *did* sign a pact with us . . . the Federation *did* open a new front almost within spitting distance of Jupiter . . .

We've got a better universe to live in now. For one thing, there's peace throughout the Solar System. Because of Ann Delaney, the government changed its ruling about women in space; you'll find 'em everywhere, nowadays, doing everything and anything men do.

But I'm glad to say Ann isn't one of those void-vampires any more. She and I—oh, sure! We're married now. I couldn't let a swell cook like her get away, could I?

AS IT WAS

By CARLTON SMITH

Backward through the ages Baird sent his Time Machine, until he stood alone—Mankind yet unspawned—and watched the awful cataclysm of a Universe being born.

WHILE Venus and Earth went merrily to war, isolationist Doctor Archimedes Baird carefully and quietly withdrew himself from the area of conflict. He had shouted his views over the television. He had composed articles and whole books on the subject. He had told the press it was the business of Earth to withdraw its peoples and interests from Venus, and leave the Venusians in peace. He, himself, was in the last war. It was a bloody, useless nuisance. He came out of it with shattered nerves and leaky valves. He believed in the future of mankind and war had no place in that future. So then came the war—and Doctor Archimedes Baird was an isolationist and would die an isolationist.

He converted his spaceship into a laboratory. It now floated a million or so miles inside the asteroid belt, orbiting slowly around the Sun. Within it, isolationist Baird went grimly to work. He entirely divorced himself from humanity. He did not care what happened to Earth or its peoples. Thought of the future absorbed him, and he dreamed a passionate dream of a journey to the future.

The slow years passed. He pattered about his well-stocked ship, a stringy figure, unclothed sometimes, unshaved and unclean for long periods. It was amazing how he changed. His eyes drew up slightly at the outer corners, and in them a slow incandescence began to burn. He talked to himself. He sang to himself. He never realized it. Nor did he take the time to scan himself in a mirror, to realize that he had become a fanatic, an eccentric whose sole desire it was to work.

One day his dream was realized. He stood looking at the time unit, a lump in his throat, numbing to himself his joy as he rubbed his long, thin bony fingers

together. Thrice he experimented. He projected objects a dozen hours into the future. Promptly on the dot, they appeared on his scarred lab table. The machine was a success.

Isolation had done its work on his soul. He had become an egoist. Who was there to praise him? He thought about it for hours that day. He moved slowly through the lonely corridors, hands behind his back, face blank with thought; stopped in the galley to make himself a pot of coffee, and warm up a can of concentrates; threw himself into an armchair in the lounge, biting at his thin, hairy lip in concentration.

To another man, the problem would have presented no difficulties. But to isolationist Baird, the very thought of once more contacting humanity, even by a radiographed message, was hard to grasp. Still, he did grasp it, and forthwith laboriously tapped out his message, trusting to somebody, somewhere, to pick it up and transmit it to its addressee, that damned, supercilious, jeering Professor Hawkes of Lisbon University. He began to smile his smug delight. When Hawkes understood that Baird had accomplished a task which Hawkes had sneered at as being impossible, Hawkes would be miserably crestfallen; he would have a new respect for Baird. Too, Hawkes had been one of those rabid war-mongers who shouted down Baird's isolationist theories. Baird scowled, and threw the message into the ether a dozen times.

"That'll teach you," he scowled.

HE did not know that Professor Hawkes had been scattered to the winds in an air raid two years ago.

Nor did he know that within short hours the Chief Officer of the Venusian war council was frowning at the translated message, which a warship had picked up



"We've got to go back further," Baird said. "Back to the beginning of Time."

and transmitted. This alien, reptilian being believed that a peculiar significance lay in that message. On the strength of the belief, he called a meeting of his war councilors.

Those individuals, however, saw nothing of importance in the radiogram.

"This Archimedes Baird, no doubt, did send the message. That he invented such a thing as a time unit is probably absurd. He was something of a crackpot. Before the war started, he made a fool of himself with his isolationist theories. His present location, as calculated by the warship commander, is of no importance to use, and merely clears up the minor matter of his disappearance."

"None-the-less, I do not intend to slide over this without some investigation. The war drags on. Now, obviously, we cannot send a warship to pick up Baird. At the first sign of violence, he would destroy his improbable time unit. I'm going to put Kobar Di-Pisk on this job."

The voluble member of the council was shocked. "But Di-Pisk is an isolationist himself! Furthermore, since you threw him in jail, he has more than once blasphemed Venusians as a whole. He couldn't be trusted."

"I think he could," the other said gently. "Di-Pisk wants his freedom. Having that, he will rapidly lose his isolationist tendencies, as would any Venusian. He realizes, with the rest of us, that this is a war to the death. Once I talk with him, I think I can convince him of that. Our trump, however, will consist of the fact that this Baird will consider Di-Pisk a cultural equal, and, therefore, a friend. I have a plan in mind which Di-Pisk certainly is clever enough to follow out.

"Send for Kobar Di-Pisk."

AND so it was that the alien creature whose name was Di-Pisk got himself into a small rocket ship, arc-jumped the Sun, and soon was approaching Doctor Archimedes Baird's cylindrically shaped laboratory ship. More peace lover than isolationist was Di-Pisk, now that the war had dragged on for weary years, and peace was his aim. Peace! It would be wonderful!

A thin little scrawny man, Doctor Archimedes Baird was at work. His soot-black smock flowed out behind him as he urged himself down the echoing corridors of his ship, trailing extension wires. His eyes shone. It had been two weeks since he transmitted his message. He hoped that Hawkes had received it. In the meantime, he could imagine Hawkes' disappointment and envy, and could delight in the thought, and could work at the problem of wiring the ship for its journey into the glorious future.

Abaft from the control room sounded then a gong. Baird could hardly believe his ears. Someone was signaling, which meant that that someone was within a thousand miles of his ship. Hawkes? Absurd.

Nonetheless, he scuttled forward, threw over the television and audio switch. The plate lighted, swirled for a fractional second with chaotic shadows which then smoothed out, dropping quickly into place to form the two-dimensional image of a seven-foot, flippered, long-tailed, scaly Venusian.

"A Venusian," gasped Baird. All his instinctive repulsion for the reptilian creatures completely throttled the hard-won, semantic realization that they were, after all, just people.

Kobar Di-Pisk's leathery, prehensile face writhed in embarrassment.

"Please," he begged in accented English. "Don't loog at me lige that."

Baird pointed a shaking finger. "You're a Venusian," he panted. "Go away. I don't want to have anything to do with a Venusian. Earth and Venus are at war . . . say! Is the war over?" His jaw dropped.

Di-Pisk regarded him sadly. He had oblate, dark-trimmed eyes. "No, indeed," he sighed. "The war is not over."

"Then you're an enemy!"

Di-Pisk's scaly, bifurcated flippers rubbed at each other worriedly. "No such thing. My friend, do not ouzt me until you discover my purpose. I am a Venusian, nazherally. But you will be interezted to know that my name is Kobar Di-Pisk!"

Baird rubbed the name with heightening amazement around on his lips. "Di-Pisk. Di-Pisk. Why, say! But how

wonderful! You mean you're *the* Di-Pisk?"

A covert, eager joy began to shine from his overly bright eyes, and when Di-Pisk happily admitted to his identity, Baird threw open the doors of his mind. By some long chance, the one creature in the universe whom Baird could or would stand had presented himself.

"Come in," cried Baird. "Come on in!"

DI-PISK parked his small ship a half hundred feet distant. Baird threw out a life-line and dragged him in. So eagerly hospitable to Di-Pisk had he become, that he helped Di-Pisk off with his space-suit. The Venusian exuded a slight, but not too unpleasant odor. Still, completely alien though Di-Pisk might be, he alone possessed mental attributes which might conceivably compare with those of Baird. The smell was well worth it.

Baird took him to the lounge, Di-Pisk meanwhile speaking apologetically of his visit.

"I have long admired your attitude," he explained. "What a pity that your people did not listen to you. The logical argumentz you advanced should have been appreciated."

Baird glowed. "But *your* speeches! What masterpieces; And in the face of all this, Earth went ahead and started the war anyway!

"You are wrong, my friend," said Di-Pisk sadly. "It was Venuz which started the war—my zavage, war-mongering planet."

A hideous scowl swept across his face which, Baird noted, was criss-crossed with certain scars. Di-Pisk plopped himself down into a deep chair, from which a cloud of dust rose. Baird sat on the other side of the room, on the edge of the chair.

Di-Pisk added, apparently still in the grip of some terrible memory, "But let uz not argue about the guilt of our zeparate worlds. That they are at war is the guilt of both, and their greates' guilt is that they did not listen to uz. Had they but read my treatizes with an open mind, or your boog, The Plea To Reason— Oh, peace! It would be wonderful!"

"Of courze, it is obviovz to you in what manner I learned of your logation,

my great friend. Being a peace-lover—" he scowled again "—I was thrown in jail by my zavage people, and even now I bear the whip zcars of their terrible brutality. These pazt weekz my hatred for my people has grown terribly, and I had withdrawn myself into zpaze; partly an exile, I admit, as I refused to join the warring rangz. I reizeved your mezzage to Prezzor Hawgez of Lisbon Univerzity. I toog the liberty of reading the mezzage, epezzhialy when I noted your name. Your prezence in zpaze exzited me. I have always felt that in zpite of our different origins, we were brothers in thought, and wizhed to meet you."

Baird rubbed his long, thin bony fingers together, his bright eyes showing his interest. "I've felt the same way. Exactly! Here I've lived, for almost three years, absolutely alone. I've worked—how I've worked. I swore I'd never suffer an interruption. To work. Ah, that is the great thing!"

"Peace!" sighed Di-Pisk, in accents longing. "Peace! It would be wonderful!"

"That and work," was Baird's enthusiastic agreement. "Di-Pisk, if you and I could work together—if we could—"

"That is it!" exclaimed Di-Pisk, arising and plopping up and down the floor with his brilliantly wrapped tail dragging behind. "That is it! If we could worg together. If we could bring about peace. Peace to our warring planetz. Wouldn't that be wonderful? And that is another reason why I visit you, my great friend. I have read your boogs, your articles—I have consumed them! There is but one creature who could worg with me in thiz great mizzion—and that is you."

He hitched up one of the broad, bright belts that supported the sagging folds of his great body.

"We—you and I—we want peace! That is what we must bring about. My great friend, your mezzage—thiz referenze to a time mazhine—you and I have the wonderful anzwer to a lazting peace!"

Baird sat on the edge of his chair, stringy hair falling down around his unwashed ears, brushing sometimes at his blade of a nose. He pushed himself erect.

"Time machine," he said guardedly.

"Yez, yez! Don't you zee? We gan go into the past. We gan change things." He stood over Baird, breathing heavily in his excitement.

Baird said, "Of course. I have got a time machine. I've been figuring on a jaunt into the future, thousands, perhaps millions of years from now, when humanity would meet my ideals. But the past?"

The very idea stunned him. And yet, there was something magnificent about it. To stop the war! It was silly of him not to think about that. Why, here he was with a time machine. Here he was, Archimedes Baird, the great man of the ages, able to bring about peace with a simple alteration of the recent past.

His bright eyes moved back to Di-Pisk, held there shrewdly for long seconds.

"Di-Pisk," he charged, "you came here with a plan!"

Di-Pisk's face squirmed. "Yez, yez! I admit it. But it is such a wonderful plan—to bring peaze!"

"Who," said Baird, "would win?"

A terrible scowl contorted Di-Pisk's face, and he touched at the whip-scars on his skin. He said throatily, "My friend, you don't know what I've zuffered at the hands of my people! Such agonies of mind and body." He leered. "I promise you that it will not be Earth who tastes defeat.

"Nor," he added, "zhall we change the gourze of human hiztory an iota! A few monthz ago there was a battle in the zwamps of Zenuz—the Battle of Zector E, they gall it—whigh, had the Earth peoples won it, the war would have ended, the egzpertz zay—"

"I see," said Baird, looking at Di-Pisk's scars askance. "Then we would first of all go to Venus. The rest of your plan—" He pursed his lips questioningly.

Di-Pisk blinked a troubled eye. "I have already promised that Earth would not know defeat," he said doubtfully. "Perhaps it would be more to the point if we dizgover whether or not the mazhine worgz, or if it will go into the past."

Baird's vanity was wounded. He glared at Di-Pisk.

"Well, then," Di-Pisk added hastily, "there is our means of logomotion. If

in zome manner we gould use your zhip—" He gestured around at the cables arcing loosely from the walls. Baird vaguely brought his attention back to the wiring job he had been working on up to the time of Di-Pisk's arrival.

"Good!" exclaimed Di-Pisk, when Baird imparted the information. "I will help you!" and so it was that Baird's last doubts were resolved, and he and Di-Pisk became partners in a momentous undertaking.

THEY brought the ship down through the cloud-layers of Venus two weeks later. Below them was jungle swamp, vast ferns rising lushly side by side with spraying conifers and crinoids—at least, such they seemed to Baird. He had never been on Venus. A great bat-winged creature bored in from the twilight, went nose up in the path of the ship and fell to one side.

"Didn't know they had those on Venus," breathed Baird.

"A common feature of thiz planet," Di-Pisk observed mildly. "Now," he added, "we will make another journey into the past."

Baird was startled. "What?"

Di-Pisk turned a surprised reptilian eye on him. "It is part of the plan," he explained.

"Oh," said Baird. "Oh." Then he got angry. "Now see here, Di-Pisk. You've told me the merest details of this plan. What happened to the Battle of Sector E?"

"Oh, *that*!" said Di-Pisk. "That comes later. My friend, I wizh you would not—that is—" He hesitated, plainly ill at ease. "It is simply that—well, my great desire for peaze leads me to make a dezision whigh I am afraid would mage you azhamed of me. I would not want that. Therefore—" He stopped imploringly.

Baird pursed his lips once or twice in a thoughtful, pouting gesture. Good heavens, what was the reptile up to? He nervously played with the buttons of his dirty smock, and Di-Pisk eagerly seized on his lack of a reply as assent. He set the time-buttons into a complex pattern. There was a burst of incandescence in the temporum tube. Di-Pisk absently screwed

in a new tube as he leaned forward in excitement to observe the new landscape.

The landscape was old, definitely old. Of life there was nothing visible save slimy giant-size creepers polluting a greasy swamp. Steam rose. The cloud layer had thickened.

Baird darted one harried glance at the time unit and the square of time-buttons. The buttons had already snapped up. Nonetheless,

"This must be a hundred million Venusian years ago," Baird gasped. He was chattering in his excitement. "You're going too far, Di-Pisk. Better let me handle it."

He placed his hands against Di-Pisk's odorous shoulder. He might as well have tried to dislodge a house from its foundations. Di-Pisk eagerly set his buttons. Another tube burned out.

"Better let me handle this!" screeched Baird vainly. He gulped. His jaw hung slack. "Where are we?" he whispered.

Di-Pisk said solemnly, "Before life!"

It was true. This was a planet in upheaval. Whimsies of visible gas gusted through canyons full of cauldron fire. The horizon was ringed with yellow flame.

"We've gone too far," said Di-Pisk. Another tube blackened itself as the ship spurted forward some million years. The volcanic fury was gone. There was a plain of charred and lifeless rock. Baird was held rooted, his bright eyes wild.

"Better let me take over," he whispered through parched lips.

Di-Pisk sent the ship at increasing speed over the dead plain, his tail twitching nervously. "We must find life again," he muttered.

"Life? Life? Why?"

"We must find the beginnings of life," said Di-Pisk.

"But I thought—"

"We must find," Di-Pisk interrupted gutturally, "*the primordial puddle!*"

BACK in his room that night—and it was truly night outside—Baird sat on the edge of his bed, thin hands clasped between his thin knees. The full awfulness of what Di-Pisk was attempting came to him for the first time. The primordial puddle! The puddle from which all Venusian life originated! The

primordial self-dividing cell, the amoeba—the first amoebaic colony!

For hours on end, Di-Pisk had sat there, grimly occupied with the task he had revealed for the first time. Edging the ship upward along the time-trail. Skirting the planet. Looking for a trace of life in tidal arms that reached in from the vast ocean. Adding a few years here as he discovered no traces of life anywhere; subtracting a few as he discovered life rampant. Narrowing the circle down to the ultimate origin.

Baird sat there, trembling with a sort of dread. Why was Di-Pisk searching for the primordial puddle? Baird thought he knew. He jumped up from the bed, walking quietly up and down the room, picking at his finger-nails. His step became more and more excited.

"He's going to do it," he panted. "The dirty, slimy reptile! He's going to do it—his own people!"

And yet Baird was not appalled. The thought struck a strange sadistic note in his breast—it was the realization of that which he dreaded. What had those years out in space done to him? He was a monster, as much a monster as Di-Pisk, perhaps. He remembered now how Professor Hawkes had scathingly insisted that the Venusians were reptiles, cunning, treacherous; their very mental processes uncharted psychological swamps. Well, by heaven, Kobar Di-Pisk, years ago an isolationist who dreaded war, was now proving that last statement. A psychological swamp! For what reason could Kobar Di-Pisk contemplate this awful thing?

Baird's fanatic eyes burned. He pattered back and forth across the width of his room, chewing at two fingers at once. By heaven! "Peace! It would be wonderful!"

The clouds hung heavily on the noon-day sky, swathing the planet with their ominous weight. A dark sea rolled mightily into the shadowed horizon. Fingers of ocean touched at the grotesque lava of the shoreline, clawing out miniature gorges and basins. An oppressive wind poured down from the far, young mountains and made a wild sad moan across a ruptured plain.

Two creatures stood on the edge of the

shoreline. They were looking down at the primordial puddle. This was about a billion years ago.

Doctor Archimedes Baird drew his eyes away from the puddle with an almost physical effort. He paled. "You intend to kill your people," he whispered, unable to meet Di-Pisk's oblate eyes. "Di-Pisk—why?"

Di-Pisk said, "You and I gan understand *that*, Dogtor Baird!"

Baird swung about, amazed. "I can?"

"Yez, Yez, of course. Are we not both peaze-lovers? Dogtor Baird, my very great friend, I gan understand and you gan understand the terrible rezponzibilities that weigh our very zouls. Aren't both of uz aware of the hatred that exists between our peoples? Thiz is no ordinary war. Our peoples are psychotic in their intensity. Fully, they intend to deztroy eagh other! Ah!" He shook his great reptilian head sadly. "The war gan end in but one way—the extermination of one of the warring parties. As I have told you, I conzider my people rezponzible for this awful thing. Thuz, I have chosen my course. Do you blame me?"

"Well—" said Baird.

Kobard Di-Pisk cried hoarsely, triumphantly, "You do not blame me! You yourself would sacrifice your own people if you thought there could be peace! Oh, peace! It would be wonderful at any prize! Answer me, Baird."

"Well," said Baird.

"Of course you would!" cried Di-Pisk.

"Of course I would," mumbled Baird, somewhat taken aback. Then, seeing Di-Pisk's pleading expression, he buttressed the statement. His eyes burned. "You're damn right I would, Di-Pisk," he said staunchly. "Any old time—anything for peace—it's wonderful!"

Di-Pisk made a moaning sound and magically produced a shiny, bulge-barrelled thermospray. He thrust it at Baird. "Take it," he choked. He turned his back.

Baird looked at the thermospray, gulping. Sweat started washing furrows in his grimed face. A cold numbness took hold of him. The thermospray weighed a ton. The cells of his brain went into a mad dance.

"Why," he gasped, "I can't!"

"Do it!" choked Di-Pisk. "Do it for me!"

The honor, the glory, all are yours."

The honor . . . the glory . . . thought Baird. Madly danced his brain. A psychotic war . . . the last man . . . or the last Venusian.

He raised the thermospray's barrel, looking at the primordial puddle, so quiet, so immeasurably potent.

The surging clouds, the wild sad wind, the rolling sea—these all paused in their disorderly gyrations as a puff of steam rose from a puddle on the ocean shore about a billion years ago.

THE following day they went forward in hope of a million years. Life never evolved. The planet was as dead as dead could be. Di-Pisk was watching Baird strangely. Baird looked back at him as strangely. Di-Pisk performed a human shrug.

"It was nezezzary," said Di-Pisk, looking at Baird warily.

Baird was wearing a desperate, idiotic, half-smile. He was hounded by a murderer's conscience.

"Ah, peace," sighed Di-Pisk. "It's wonderful."

The cloud layers thinned out after a half-billion years. Di-Pisk watched Baird uneasily as the ship thundered along. The night was flooded with stars. Life had never evolved.

Baird screamed "Look!" He raised a petrified arm toward a full moon.

Immediately, Di-Pisk jumped to his feet, edged to a point behind Baird, licking at his lips with a sharp pointed tongue. "Well, yez," he said. "How beautiful!"

Baird turned and pounded him madly on his odorous chest. "It's the Moon. It's Earth's Moon. Venus hasn't got a moon. We've made a mistake. You said this was Venus. It isn't. It's Earth. That's Earth's Moon up there."

He fell back, molten fire in his throat.

Di-Pisk said angrily, half comically, "What'z that? What'z that? I zaid thiz was Venuz? Why, Baird, how absurd."

"You knew this was Earth," yelled Baird, half mad.

"Now zee here," uttered Di-Pisk, scowling. "What'z thiz you're accuzing me of? Of course, I knew it was Earth. Didn't you? You *didn't*?" He appeared shocked. "Why, my great friend! Didn't you un-

derzstand that it was Earth we landed on—the Earth of a hundred million years in our past? The Earth of the carboniferous period. Why, how unfortunate that Earth of that time and Venuz of my present should be so similar.”

He appeared to consider this shocking revelation.

“How very, very unfortunate,” he said cautiously. Then he brightened. He said with encouragement, “But did not you yourself say that you would extinguish your zpeziez if given the chance? It was for that reason only that I asked you to take my place!”

“Peace!” he exclaimed. “Peace!”

Doctor Archimedes Baird said gutturally, “You said that Earth would not taste defeat!”

“They haven’t,” uttered Di-Pisk reassuringly. “Humanity never existed.”

“You said, that the course of human history would not be changed an iota.”

“Well! Was it? It was lopped off cleanly!”

“You said you would bring peace between our peoples!” Baird mouthed. He knew the answer to that one, though. He jumped at Di-Pisk, his hands extended. He intended, of course, to throttle Di-Pisk. Di-Pisk knocked him unconscious with a flipper, and Baird curled up in a corner.

Di-Pisk sighed and smiled and made various hissing noises as he went back to his controls and zoomed the ship up out of the atmosphere. They were once more back in the present. Now he would go back to his people. He sighed gustily. Peace! The price was worthwhile, considering the result.

How wonderful would be the homecoming.

Tottering into the control room came Baird when the ship was but a half hour out from the cloud-laced capital city. He was pale and thin and he had a mad cast in his eye. He seated himself at Di-Pisk’s smelly side. He watched as the cloud-layers enclosed the ship.

Di-Pisk felt very sorry for him. “You’ll get over this,” he promised. “After all, what is there of value in the universe save worg? My people will lay materials and tools without number at your feet. Worg! Ah, it’s wonderful!”

Di-Pisk was happy as they burst through the lower cloud layer. He hummed out a guttural Venusian hymn, carefully keeping the ship in the air. Suddenly he heard Baird laughing thinly, unnaturally. Poor Baird, thought Di-Pisk—until he saw what Baird was laughing at so madly.

He went very quiet. He no longer hummed. A stricken expression worked at his face.

Very gently he brought the ship down to a soft landing. Baird continued to laugh, monotonously. Di-Pisk got up and opened the air-lock. He stepped outside, walking up and down on the hard rock, vainly trying to catch the scent of vegetation or the throaty squawk of some flying reptile.

He came back into the ship after a while. He looked at Baird.

He said casually, “Wasn’t there a scientist on your Earth once who was named Arrhenius?”

Baird dumbly nodded his head, in between his quiet chuckles.

Di-Pisk went outside again. He thought he might see the tall ferns of his native planet. Then he returned. He cleared his throat to attract Baird’s attention. Di-Pisk was making a vast effort to control himself. A horrible event had occurred. He said, “This Arrhenius—was it not he who formed a hypothez that the germs of life are garried on the wings of light from planet to planet?”

Baird leered at him. “That’s true.”

Di-Pisk went out again. This time when he returned, he stayed. His prehensile face quivered with emotion. “The hypotheziz was a fact, my great friend,” he whispered. “Venuz is as devoid of life as Earth itself. All the life, vegetable and animal, originated from a zingle primordial puddle. It is all over. Forgive me, my friend, for a great blunder.”

He choked. But he soon got himself in hand. He arose. He cried indomitably, “But in our way, we have succeeded. You have your worg. I have my peace.”

Whereupon Doctor Archimedes Baird raised the thermospray and boiled Kobar Di-Pisk’s brains in his skull.

He stood in the airlock, squinting down the barrel of the thermospray. “Peace!” he agreed, happily, smiling with his wild-bright eyes. “Peace!”

Venus Enslaved

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

What chance had the castaway Earthman and his crossbow-weaponed Amazons against the mighty Frogmasters of the Veiled Planet?



BLACK velvet infinity all around, punctured and patterned with the many-hued jewels of space—comforting, somehow, because they made the

same constellation patterns you used to see on Earth. There was the Dipper, there Scorpio, there Orion. But the twinkle was shut off, as though every star had turned

Illustrated by Winfield Scott Hoskins



cold and silently watchful toward your impudent invasion of emptiness.

So big was the universe that the little recess which did duty for control-room, observation-point and living-cabin seemed even smaller than it was; which was very small indeed. Planter forgot the dizzy lightness of head and body, here beyond gravity, and turned his wondering eyes outward from where he lay strapped in his spring-jointed hammock, toward the firmament, and decided that there was nothing in all his past life that he would change if he could.

"Check blast-tempo," came the voice of Disbro just beyond his head, a high, harsh, commanding voice. "Check lubrication-loss and check sun-direction. Then brace yourself. We may land quicker than we thought."

Planter leaned toward the instrument panel that covered most of the bulkhead to the right of his hammock. The pale glow from the dials highlighted his face, young, bony, intent. "Blast-tempo adequate," he called back to Disbro. "Lubrication-loss about seven point two. Three point nine six degrees off sunward. Air loss nil."

"Who asked for air loss?" snubbed Disbro from his hammock forward. He was leaner than Planter, taller, older. Even in his insulated coveralls, bulking against whatever temperature or pressure danger might be threatened by the outer space, he was of a dangerous elegance of figure and attitude. His face, framed in tight, cushioned helmet, was so narrow that it seemed compressed sidewise—dark eyes crowded together with only a disdainful blade of nose between them, a mouth short but strong, a chin like the pointed toe of a stylish boot, a cropped black mustache. Back on lost Earth, Disbro had frightened men and fascinated women. His cunning crime-administration had been almost too neat for the police, but not quite; or he would not have been here, with his life barely held in his elegant fingertips.

"Venus plumb center ahead," he told Planter. "Have a look."

That last as if he were granting a favor. Planter twisted in the hammock. He saw the taut-slung cocoon that would be Disbro's netted body, the control board like a bigger, more complex typewriter where

Disbro could reach and strike key-combinations to steer, speed or otherwise maneuver the ship.

Beyond, a great round port, at its middle a disk the size of a table-top. Against the black, airless sky, most of that disk looked as blue as the thinnest of milk. One smooth edge was brightened to cream—the sunward limb of Venus. But even the dimmer expanse showed fluffy and gently rippling, a swaddling of opaque cloud.

"That," said Disbro, "is our little gray home in the west."

"I wonder what's underneath the clouds," mused Planter, for the millionth time.

"All those science-pots, sitting home on the seats of their expensive striped pants, wonder that," snarled Disbro. "That's why they sent eight rockets before us, smack into the cloud. That's why, with eight silences out of a possible eight, they rigged this ninth. That's why, when nobody was fool enough to volunteer, they dug up three convicts who were all neatly earmarked to be killed anyway, and gave them a bang at the job."

Three convicts—Planter, Disbro, and Max. Planter had forgotten Max, as everyone was apt to, including Max himself. For Max had been a sturdy athlete, a coming heavyweight champion, until too many gaily-accepted blows had done something to his mind. Doctors said some concussion unbalanced him, but not far enough so that he didn't know right and wrong apart when he killed his manager for cheating on certain gate receipts. And so, prison and a sentence to the chair with the reprieve that came by recommendation of the Rocket Foundation on March 30, 2082. Now Max was in the compartment aft, keeping the levers kicking that ran the rocket engines. Show Max how to do a thing and he'd keep right on doing it until you pulled him away, or until he dropped.

What would Max's last name be, wondered Planter. He studied the face of Venus. He sang to himself, softly:

"Oh, thou sublime sweet evening star. . . ."

Softly, but not too softly for Disbro's excellent ears. Disbro chuckled.

"You know opera, Planter? Pretty fancy for an ex-con."

"I know that piece," said Planter shortly.

"Wolfram's hymn to Venus, from *Tannhauser*."

IT had started him thinking again. Gwen had played it so often on her violin. Played it and sung it. Those were the days he hadn't known she was married, down in her red-and-gold apartment in the Artists Quarter. He'd been sculptoring her—she'd had the second best figure he ever saw. Then he found out about her husband, for the husband burst in upon them. The husband had tried to kill Planter, but Planter had killed the husband. And Gwen had sworn his life away.

"Check elapsed time," Disbro bade him.

"Fifty-eight days nine hours and fifty-four minutes point seven," rejoined Planter at once.

"Prompt, aren't you? We'll be on Venus before the sixty-fourth day." Planter saw Disbro shift over in his hammock. "I'm going to shave. Then eat."

Disbro turned a stud in the wall. His electric razor began to hum. Planter opened a locker-valve and brought forth his own rations—a package of concentrated solid, compounded of chocolate, meat extract, several vitamin agents. It would sustain him for hours, but was anything but a fill to his hunger. He chewed it slowly to make it last longer, and sipped from a snipe-nosed container of water, slightly effervescent and acidulated. A few drops escaped between snout and lip, and swam lazily in the gravityless air of the cabin, like shiny little bubbles.

"Planter," said Disbro, suddenly pleasant, "we're going to fool 'em."

He shut off his razor. Planter took another nibble. "Yes, Disbro?"

"We'll land at the north pole."

Planter shook his head. "We can't. This rocket is set at mid-point on the Venusian disk."

"We can. I've tinkered with the controls. A break for us, no break for the Foundationers at home. They're watching us through telescopes. What they want is our crash on Venus, with a great up-flare of the exploding fuel. Then they'll know that we landed, and can shake hands all 'round on a 'successful advancement.' But we're curving away, then in. I've fixed that. We'll not blow off and make any signal; but we'll live."

"North pole," mused Planter, pensively.

"No spin to Venus up there. We'll land solidly. We'll land where it's coolest, and none too cool. Her equator must be two degrees hotter than Satan's reception hall. The pole may be endurable."

"What then?" asked Planter.

"We'll live, I say. Don't you want to live?"

Planter hadn't thought about it lately. But suddenly he knew that he did want to live. His was a family of considerable longevity. His grandfather had attained the age of one hundred and seven, and had claimed to remember the end of the Second World War.

"Six days to study it over," Disbro was saying. "Then we'll have a try. If we land alive, we'll laugh. If we die trying, we'll have nothing to worry about. Float up here, will you? Take over. I'm going to have a little sleep."

THROUGH choking steam, white and ever-swirling, drove the silvery cigar that was the ninth rocket ship to attempt to voyage across space. From its snout blossomed sudden flame, blue and red and blue again—rocket counter-blasts that were designed to act as brakes. They worked, somewhat. The speed cut from bullet-rate to falling-rate. From falling-rate to flying-rate. Then, of a sudden, partial clarity around it. Within an upper envelope of blinding vapors, Venus had a thinner atmosphere, partially transparent. Below showed a surface of fluffy greens, all sorts of greens—lettuce, apple, olive, emerald, spinach, sea greens. Vegetation, plainly, and lots of it. The ship, steadying in its plunge like a skilled diver, nosed across toward a wet, slate-dark patch that must be open ground. From the stern, where rocket tubes had ceased blazing, broke out a massive expanse of fabric—a parachute. Another and another. Down floated the craft, thudding, at last, upon its resting place.

Planter felt a cramping pain. He realized that to feel pain one must be alive. Then his head throbbed—it hung head downward. Gravity was back. He groped for his hammock fastenings, loosened them, and lowered himself to a standing position beneath, on the round port that had been forward. Disbro hung in his

hammock, motionless but moaning faintly.

Planter hurriedly freed him and laid him flat on his back. He fumbled a locker open, brought out a water-pot. A little spurt between Disbro's short, scornful lips brought him back to consciousness.

"We made it," was Disbro's first comment, full of triumph and savagery. "Help me up. Thanks. Whooh! We seem to have socked in somewhere, nose first."

He was right. No sign of light or open air showed through the forward port, nor the side ports from which Planter had been wont to study the reaches of space. Disbro looked up. The after bulkhead, now their ceiling, had a hatchway. "Hoist me," he said to Planter, who made a stirrup of his hands and obliged. The slightly lesser gravitational pull of Venus made Disbro more active than on Earth. He caught Planter's hammock, got his foot on a side-bracket for steadiness, and climbed up to the hatch. A tug at the clamps opened it, and he wriggled through.

"Wake up, you big buffalo," Planter heard him snarling. Max was evidently unconscious up there. Planter, without a helper to lift him, made shift by climbing Disbro's hammock, then his own, to gain the compartment above.

"He'd have died if he had an ounce of brains," commented Disbro, pointing. Max lay crumpled against the bulkhead, close to the great bank of levers he had been working. In his hands were grasped broken pieces of network from his hammock.

"He was out of the lashings when we landed," Disbro went on. "We were about to hit, and he grabbed hold. Must have passed out. But the big lump's single-minded—abnormally so. He hung on without knowing, and the breaking of those strands kept him from crashing full force."

Planter knelt and pulled Max straight. Max was tremendous, a burly troll in his coveralls. His shoulders were almost a yard wide, his hands like oversize gloves. His big face, with its broad jaw, heavy dark brows and ruddy cheeks, might have been handsome, was not the nose smashed in by a blow taken in some old ring battle.

"Don't waste water," cautioned Disbro as Planter hunted for the food-locker.

"I'll bring him out of it." He knelt and slapped the inert face sharply.

Max's mouth opened, showing a gap where his front teeth had been beaten out. He gave a grumbling yell, then sprang erect so suddenly that Disbro, starting away, almost fell through the hatchway. Max saw Planter, scowled and snorted, then fell into a boxing stance. He inched forward, his mighty fists fiddling hypnotically.

"Time!" yelled Planter at once. "This isn't a fight, Max! We've landed—safe and alive—on Venus!"

Max's eyes widened a little. He grinned loosely, and pulled off his helmet. His skull was thatched with bushy, black hair. "Uhh," he said, in a deep, chiding tone. "I forgot. Uhhh."

"Forgot!" echoed Disbro scornfully. "He sounds as if he had the ability to remember."

Planter studied the ports in this compartment. They, too, were obscured by wet-looking grail soil. The ship must be well buried in the crust of Venus. What if it was completely submerged, a tomb for them? He glanced upward to another hatchway, one that would lead past the rocket engines.

"Don't go up," Max cautioned him throatily. "Hot up there."

"Brilliant," was Disbro's ill-humored rejoinder. "Max actually knows that the engines will be hot."

Planter clapped Max on the big shoulder. "It'll be all right," he reassured the giant. "Get me a wrench, will you? That long-shanked one for tightening tube-housings will do."

HE scrambled up along the levers, which made a ladder of sorts. The hatch to the engines had to be loosened with the wrench. Beyond, as Max had sagely warned him, it was stiflingly hot. He avoided gleaming, sweltering tubes and housings, scrambling to where a four-foot circle of nuts showed in the bulkheading. This would be the plate that closed the central stern, among the rear rocket-jets. He began to loosen one.

"Stop that, you fool!" It was Disbro, who had climbed after him and was watching. "Who knows about this lower atmosphere of Venus?"

"I'm going to find out about it," replied Planter, a little roughly, for he did not like Disbro's manner. He gave the nut another turn.

"Wait, wait," cautioned Disbro. He climbed all the way into view, holding up a glass flask with a neck attachment of gauges and pipings. "I got a sample, through the lock-panel—plenty of air-bubbles were carried down with us. Let me work it out before you do anything heroic."

Disbro was right. He was usually right, about technologies. Planter mopped his brow on the sleeve of his coverall, and waited.

"Yes," Disbro was commenting. "Oxygen—nice article of that, and plenty. Nitrogen, too. Just like Earth. Quite a bit of carbon dioxide. It'll be from all that vegetation. Certified breathable. Go on and unship that plate."

Planter did so. He loosed the last net, and pushed against the plate. It stirred easily—the after part of the ship would still be in the open. Disbro, climbing after him, caught his elbow.

"I go out first," he announced. "They marked me down as senior of the expedition. One side."

Planter stared quizzically, and once again did as Disbro told him. The lean man thrust up the plate like a trapdoor, and crept out.

"At last!" he yelled back. "Men on Venus! Come on, Planter!"

Planter called back to Max, who was bringing up a bundle of articles Disbro had chosen for the venture outside—two repeating rifles, two pistols, several tools, and tins of food, coils of rope. Planter helped him with the load, and they got outside with it.

Disbro had slid down the step bulge of the hull. He clung to a grab-iron, his feet just above the gray muck into which they had plunged. He stared up.

"First man to set foot on Venus," he was saying. "Who was second of you two?"

"We didn't stop to bother," Planter replied. "What now?"

He stared around, to answer his own question. Venus was dull, like a very cloudy day at home. The air was moist, but fresh, and little wreaths and veils of

mist kept one from seeing far. But he made out that they had found lodgment in a sterile-looking clearing with a muddy floor that might or might not sustain a man's weight. All around was a crowded wall of vegetation—towering high above the range of his vision into upper fog, tight grown as a hedge, and vigorously fat of twig and leaf. Planter, no botanist, yet was aware at once of strangeness beyond his power to describe. He knew that specimens should be gathered and preserved to take home.

To take home? Home to Earth? But the ship was almost buried in this mud. He remembered Disbro's dry comment—"Our little gray home in the west." They were on Venus. Undoubtedly to stay.

Max, beside him, gave a sort of gurgling bellow of surprise and fear.

"Uhhh! Something's got Mr. Disbro!"

FOR once, Max was being articulate. For once, Disbro was being silent.

Glancing down, Planter saw the slender, elegant figure writhed close against the metal hull, clutching with both hands the grab-iron. Disbro stared groundwards, and what could be seen of his face was as white as a wood-boring grub. One of his legs was drawn up, knee bracing upon the plates, the other stretched out grotesquely, as if to point a toe at something in the muck.

It took a second staring study to realize that a whiplike strand of something that gleamed and tightened was snapped around Disbro's ankle.

"Rope, Max," snapped Planter. He made a quick hitch around a rocket-tube, and lowered himself in a rush. His free hand grasped a heavy automatic pistol. He paused in his descent just above Disbro, studying the black, shiny tether.

It protruded from the semi-glutinous mud, which stirred and quivered around the protrusion. A sense was there of rigid grasp and slowly contracting pressure. It was squeezing the captured ankle, it was shortening itself to pull Disbro down. Disbro said nothing because he had caught his breath for an effort at wrenching free. But he could not do that. His strong, lean fingers were beginning to slip on the grab iron. He turned horror-widened eyes toward Planter.

"Hang on," muttered Planter, and aimed his pistol. No sure shot, he nevertheless was close to his target. He fired a .50 caliber slug, another and another. Two of them hit the tall, tentacle or proboscis.

At once it let go of Disbro, gesticulating wildly. Blood sprang forth on its shiny integument—Venusian blood was red, mused Planter, even as Venusian herbage was green. Disbro gave a choking gurgle that might have been thanks, relief or effort. A moment later he was swarming up Planter's rope like a monkey.

But Planter did not follow. The appendage he had wounded was drawing out of sight, like a worm into its hole; but two more just like it had fastened upon his foot and knee.

He lost his grip and fell into the mud. It was like a dip into thick gravy. The stuff lapped and closed over his head, and he let go of the pistol to try to swim. A couple of laborious strokes brought him back to the surface, gasping and blowing away thick lumps from nose and mouth. A moment later two more tentacles were groping and seizing at his shoulder and waist. Four bonds now tightened upon him, like lariats.

Planter seemed to be thinking in two compartments. One set of thoughts dictated his floundering, desperate struggle. The other considered the situation with a curiosity dispassionate and almost mild. The creature that snared him was just what he might have expected—something on the octopus order. How many science fiction stories had dealt with such monsters on strange worlds? The creepy writhings of tentacles appealed to fantasy writers—the neat, simple, active structure of the brute was logical to the great mechanic who devised Nature. The thing had him, in any case, if he could not kick or struggle or cut free.

Cut free! That was it. He had a knife, in the side pocket of his coveralls.

He dug for it, almost dropped it from his muddy fingers, then yanked open the biggest blade. He slashed at the nearest tentacle, the one around his waist. It parted like a cane-stalk before a machete. The other arms quivered and slackened, plainly shocked by pain. Planter rolled out of their grip, started to swim away anywhere.

He looked over his shoulder and saw his enemy as it humped itself partially into view.

Not such an octopus, after all.

The dispassionate part of Planter's brain called the thing an animated hall tree. The slender tentacles sprouted from a thicker trunk, that could curve and writhe and wallow, but not so readily. It was of a rubbery gray-brown, and at the upper end, nested among the tentacle-roots, was what must be its mouth. That mouth opened and shut in almost wistful hunger. Planter swam furiously. He wanted to reach and climb the stern of the rocket ship, but the thing knew his wish, and moved to head him off. He kicked and fought his way toward the far mass of leaves that bordered this mud-pit.

From among those leaves glowed for an instant a sort of splinter of yellow light. A small object sang over Planter's helmeted head like a bee, and struck behind him with a little *chock*. It must have found lodgment against the hall-tree thing, which paused in its pursuit to flop and spatter the mud with its tentacles. Planter blessed the diversion, whatever it was, and strove nearer to the shore.

The forest was alive, he suddenly decided. Out of its misty tangle a great leafy branch swung knowingly toward him. He clutched at it, brought away a fat, moist handful of strange-shaped leaves. His other hand made good its hold on the branch itself, and with the last of his strength he dragged himself to where roots hummocked above the mud.

Then he saw where the branch had come from. A slim, active figure stood among the stems, pressing with both hands upon the base of the branch to make it move into the open. As Planter scrambled to safety, the figure relaxed its helpful shoving, and the branch moved back toward the perpendicular.

Planter gazed in utter lost unbelief at this stranger.

It was a woman, young, fair, fine-limbed. She wore the briefest of garments, belted around with strange weapons, and her feet were shod in cross-gartered buskins. Upon her tumble of golden curls rode a metal helmet that reminded him of Grecian antiquity. Her bare arms, round but strong, cradled something with a stock and

butt of a musket, but with a short, tight-strung bow at its muzzle—surely the pattern of a medieval crossbow.

Her face was of a flawless pink-and-white beauty, just now stamped with utter disdain. Its short, rosy mouth opened, and formed words.

Words that Planter understood!

"You fool," said the girl with the crossbow. "You scurvy fool."

DISBRO, barely able to stir for shock and weariness, climbed only a few hand's breadths out of danger before he must stop and wheeze for breath. At last he could make himself heard:

"Max! You pighead, help me!"

"Uhh," came the grunt of ascent from above, as the big fellow slid down in turn. He slipped a thick arm around Disbro, hoisting the tall, slender body as if it were a bundle of old clothes, and slid it across a shoulder like the jut of a crag. Then Max scaled the rope once again, to the safe top of the nosed-over rocket ship.

Disbro found his own feet, and shakily wiped his clear-cut face, still pale from exertion and terror. "That was close."

"Say," ventured Max, "Mr. Planter, he's gone."

Disbro looked around. The mud expanse around them was stirred up as if by boiling struggles, but there was no sign of Planter or the thing with the tentacles.

"That thing got him," decided Disbro, but Max shook his heavy head.

"Huh-uh," he demurred. "No. The girl, she got him."

"Girl?" echoed Disbro, and scowled.

"What girl?"

Max pointed with a finger like the haft of a hammer. "She was in the trees. Got him."

Disbro peered at the trees, then at Max. His scowl deepened. "What are you driveling about?"

"The girl," said Max.

Disbro snorted and skinned his teeth in scorn.

"How," he demanded of the misty skies, "do I get mixed up with minus quantities like this? A girl, the man says! Here on Venus!"

"A girl," repeated Max firmly.

Disbro wheeled upon him.

"Come off of that!" he commanded sharply. "Planter's gone. Dead. You're all I have to associate with. You'll act sane, whether you are or not."

Max's big, pained eyes faltered before the glittering accusation of Disbro's gaze.

"All right," he conceded.

"There wasn't any girl there, you idiot!"

Max nodded. "I saw—"

"Shut up!" Disbro cut him off. "No girl, I said!"

"No girl," repeated Max obediently.

Rain began to fall, fat drops the size of marbles.

"Back inside," commanded Disbro. "There'll be lots of this kind of weather. We'll have something to eat, then study another way to reach the trees yonder."

"No girl," said Max. "But I saw."

THE rain that drove Disbro and Max back into their shelter filtered through layers of leafage, beginning to wash the mud from Planter's clothing. He stared again at his rescuer.

"I seem to have understood what you said," he managed at last.

"Isn't so strange, that?" she flung back, in words somehow run together. "E'en though you're mad enow to sport with yonder muck-worm," and her wide, bright blue eyes flicked toward the danger he had lately avoided, you'll have the tongue of mankind. Art no man?"

"Man enough, young woman," rejoined Planter, a little nettled. "I suppose it's like the fantasies—we can read each other's minds, or something."

"Something," she echoed, as if humoring a child.

"And I owe you thanks for saving my life."

"Oh, 'twas no great matter." She shouldered the crossbow. "Come, for the Skygors will be about our heels."

She picked her way rapidly among the steam, with the surest and cleverest of feet. Women on Earth were never so graceful or sure, decided Planter, hurrying after. He was aware that he did not step on the muddy surface of Venus, but upon a matted over-floor, of roots, fallen stems, ground-vines, sometimes great sturdy leaves like lily-pads grown to the size of double mattresses. "Wait, young lady," he called, "who are the Skygors, you men-

tioned and why should they be after us?"

She halted again, swung and studied him with more of that disdainful curiosity. "Tis a gruel-brained idiot," she decided, as if to herself. "For that they cast him out. Methought 'twas strange that a man should flee, of himself, from sure shelter and victual."

It was raining harder. The great roof of vegetation only partially broke that downpour. It sluiced away the coating of mud from Planter, and soaked his stout garments through. He felt miserable in the dampness, but his girl guide thrived, if anything, in the drops that struck and rolled down her bare arms and shoulders.

He saw, too, that she followed something of a trail among the stalks and stems. It was barely wider than his own stalwart shoulders could pass, and wound crazily here and there; but one must stick to it, for to right and left the jungle grew thicker than a basket. He called out again.

"Miss! Young lady!"

She turned, as before. "What now?"

"This path—what is it? Did you make it? Tell me things." He made a gesture of appeal, for she was putting on that look of contempt once more. "You see, I'm no more than an hour old on this planet—"

"Od so! Your brain is younger than that. Leave me, I have no time for idiots."

Abruptly she stiffened, widened her eyes, lifted a finger to her red lips for silence. The two of them stood close together in the misty rain, their ears sharpened. Planter heard what she had heard—a rustling, crunching approach, along some other angle of the jungle path.

The girl wrenched apart two sappy lengths of vine, and with a jerk of her head bade Planter slip through into the great thicket. He did so, and she followed. Turning, her lithe body close against his, she brought her crossbow to the ready.

"Danger?" whispered Planter, and she nodded bleakly.

The approach was coming near. Planter judged that whatever threatened them was two-legged, weighty, and great-lunged—many yards off, it wheezed like a faulty engine. His companion's ears were better than his, or more experienced. She gauged the nearness of the stranger, and the crossbow went to her shoulder like a rifle. Planter saw that it operated on a spring

trigger that would trip a latch and release the string. The bow, violently recovering from its bending, would force the missile along a groove in the top of the stock. All parts—stock, bow, and string—were of some massive dark metal, apparently treated with grease to save it from the constant dampness. The missile itself was not an arrow, but seemed the size and shape of a silvery fountain pen. Planter burned to ask questions about it; but the enemy was in sight by now, something of mottled green and black that shouldered upright along the way between the thickets.

Planter felt his companion's body grow tense against his shoulder. Her finger touched the trigger lightly. The metal string twanged, and with a waspy hum the missile leaped toward its target. At the same time, a little burst of flame showed from it, bright yellow. *Chock!* the shot went home, as that other shot against the thing called a muck-worm.

Down floundered the green-spotted form. At once the girl was out of hiding, and stooping above her quarry.

Planter, following, peered with wonder and caution. He saw a body larger than himself, and grotesquely of the same build. A dumpy torso on massive back-bent legs like a cricket's; wide flapper feet, a round, low head with a monstrous slash of mouth, big eyes now filming with death, no nose at all—the creature was very like a nightmare frog. But this frog wore garments, of linked and plaited metal wire and rubbery-looking fabric. It had a silver belt, with pouches and holsters. These pouches and holsters the girl was now plundering.

"Quick," she snapped at Planter over her rosy shoulder. "Take the spoil. He will have friends, and they must not find us."

HER tone was still reminiscent of Disbro speaking to Max. Planter's ravenous curiosity was at last completely overridden. "Young lady," he said flatly. "I'm not prepared to endure any more—"

She suddenly screamed, not like a warrior but like any girl who is mortally frightened.

Planter had the time to realize that she saw something just beyond him. He pivoted and set himself as another of the froggy beings charged.

"More Skygors!" he heard a cry behind him, and he knew that it was Skygors he faced.

Planter was a boxer of sorts, strong if not brilliant, and his unthinking reflex was to plant his feet, bend his knees, and crouch for attack or defense. That reflex shortened his height by several inches, and saved his life. The Skygors that rushed him had pointed a pistol-form weapon, from which came yellow flame as from the crossbow. A silvery object meant to scatter his brains only sang above his head with millimeters to spare. Before the pistol-like weapon could aim and spit again, Planter had charged in.

It was all he could do, but it was enough. He jabbed viciously with his left fist, followed with his right to the abdomen. The left knuckles slashed soft flesh about the wide mouth, his right hand almost broke on a hard belt-buckle. Both blows were staggering to the wheezing adversary, who dropped its pistol and yelled with a voice like a steam whistle. It made words, each of them almost deafening to Planter. To silence it more than anything else, Planter drove in closer still and lifted an uppercut as though it were a shovelful of gravel.

It found the point where a Terrestrial man would have a chin. Down floundered the clumsy body, and Planter, with no thought of referees or rules, set his heavy boot on the face and bashed it in. He stepped across the subsiding form, in time to encounter another.

This one got great flappy hands upon him. Their grip was knowing, powerful, wicked. The Skygor plucked him close, its mouth grinned into a gape. It had teeth, it was going to bite.

He was held by the shoulders, and doubted if he could break away. Instead of trying, he put his own hands to the thing's elbows, drew his right knee tight to his chest and planted a toe in a metal-clad midriff. Then, even as the open paw sought to seize his face, he threw himself backward. Landing flat on his shoulder blades, he drew down with his hands and hoisted with his feet.

His opponent somersaulted in air, and fell with a heavy squashing thump upon the root-tangled floor of the trail. In a flash, Planter was up. He jumped with

both feet. Bones broke under the impact. A second Skygor was down—dead or dying—

"Aside!" the girl was calling, and he obeyed, flattening against a cross-weaving of vine stems. She was risen upon one knee, crossbrow to shoulder. It twanged, flashed, and once again its successful charge sounded its *chock*. Planter glanced down the trail in time to see a fourth and last Skygor drop down.

He found that he was gasping for air, and trembling as though the danger were still to come instead of past. The girl rose, came to him, and touched his arm. She smiled, her eyes shone. Gone was the contempt, the superiority. She only admired, completely and frankly.

"Sink me, you're a fighter," she said. "Ecod! I saw only the flight of fists, and a Skygor went down, and another! You saved my life—and we have four Skygors to strip, with none to boom about where we went from here. Your name, friend?"

"Planter," he said. "David Planter."

"David Planter," she repeated. Her "A" was very broad, so that she made the name almost "Dyvid." Again she smiled. "A king's name, is't not? I am called Mara. Come, help me take what is valuable from this carrion."

Planter's heart warmed to her. "Thanks for your kind words," he smiled back. "But I did what any man would do."

"All men are slaves," she surprised him by saying. "You will amaze the other girl-warriors, when I bring you to the Nest."

DISBRO, standing on the glass portpane that was now floor for the control-room, labored and cursed at his keyboard. He pressed one, two, an octave. The nosed-over ship stirred, but did not rise.

"Max!" bawled Disbro to the upper hatch. "Pressure!"

"Giving you all there is," Max informed him timidly.

Disbro turned from his controls, shrugging in disgust.

"Those bow-tubes are jammed or displaced," he cursed. "We can't clear off till we get her up and clean them—and we can't get her up and clean them until they work. Huhh!"

Max's big, diffident face framed itself

in the hatchway, registering a small hope. "We're floating," he volunteered. "Close to those trees and things."

Disbro showed interest. "Then we'll get our feet on solid ground, or nearly solid. That tentacle-thing won't be sloshing around." He beckoned. "Come down."

Max obeyed. From a locker Disbro took a pressure squirt of waterproofing liquid. He sprayed Max's clothes, then his own. "That'll shed rain," he said. "Buckle on a pistol, if you're smart enough to use one. And give me two."

Once more the hammocks in the lower chamber, and the levers in the higher, gave them a ladder-way up. Disbro, emerging first into the damp, warm mist, saw at once that they had visitors.

The ship, as Max said, floated close to the mat of growth that fringed the muddy pool. Here the jungle consisted of meaty stems, straight, thick and close-set, with tangled fermiform foliage. A little above mud-level, gnarled roots wove into a firm footing, and upon it, pressing from the thickets toward the ship, were huge biped creatures in gleaming metal harness.

These had chopped down spongy trunks and branches, on which to venture over the mud-surface as on rafts. Coming near the ship, they had passed cables of grease-clotted metal wire around it, mooring it fast to thicker trunks. As Disbro stared down, several of them began to converse in tones that rang and boomed like great gongs. Half-deafened, Disbro still could perceive that their voices had inflection and sense. Harness, concerted action, tools, a language—here was a master race, comparable to Terrestrial humanity.

One of them turned a bulging black eye upward, and saw Disbro. Its flat face split across, and a mouth like an open Gladstone bag shouted its discovery. One green paw, webbed but prehensile, snatched a weapon from a metal-linked waist belt, and aimed it at the Terrestrial.

But Disbro, too, was quick on the draw. His gang-rule on Earth had necessitated shooting skill as well as leadership. His own automatic sprang into his hand. "No, you don't!" he snapped, and shot the weapon out of the Venusian's flipper.

It screamed in a voice that vibrated the steamy air, and its companions started and shrank back in startled wonder. Disbro

drew a second pistol, leveling it at them.

"I'll shoot the first one that moves," he promised, as if they could understand; and understand they did. Up went shaky flipper-hands.

"No! No!" they boomed in thunderous humility. "Don't! Don't!"

He had not the time to wonder that they spoke words he knew. He swung his weapons in swift arcs, covering them all. Max, behind, had sense enough to level the long barrel of a repeating rifle. "Please!" roared a Venusian who seemed to be a leader. "We do naught to you!"

"Better not," cautioned Disbro loftily. "We're more profitable as friends than as enemies."

"Friends!" agreed the leader. "Friends!"

"If you try any funny business—" went on Disbro. "Well, watch!"

He snapped his right-hand gun up and fired. The bullet snipped away a leaf the size of an opened umbrella. As the great green blob drifted down, Disbro fired again and again, until, ripped to rags, the leaf fell limply among the Venusians. They moaned, like awe-struck fog horns.

"Understand?" taunted Disbro. "Savvy? I could kill you all as easy as look at you."

"Friends!" promised the leader again.

"Max," muttered Disbro, "these birds quit very easily without a fight. But keep me covered from up here."

Planter's rope still dangled along the hull. Disbro slid down, coming to his feet on the raft-heap below. The Venusians gave back in wary confusion. Disbro allowed himself to smile upward.

"See what an ape you are, Max?" he chuckled. "You got a look at one of these, and thought it was a girl! You're not much of a picker, Max."

To the Venusian chief he said: "I think I'll muscle in on your territory."

MARA, the crossbow-girl, brought Planter to the place she called the Nest.

It was hollowed out in the thickest part of the towering jungle, as a rabbit's form is hollowed among tall grasses. The floor was of plaited and pressed withes, supported on stumps and roots of many tall growths. Rounding upward and outward from this were walls, also of wooden poles and twigs, woven into the growing tangle.

The roof was similarly made, but strengthened and waterproofed with earth, dried and baked by some sort of intense heat.

The space thus blocked off was shaped like the rough inside of a hollow pumpkin, and in size was comparable to the auditorium of a large theater. Within it were set up smaller huts and bowers. There were common cooking-fires, in ovens of stone and mud-brick, and a great common light suspended from the ceiling by a long heavy chain. This was a metal lamp, fed by oily sap from some sort of tree.

Finding the Nest was difficult. Mara had picked a careful way through mazes of thick vegetation, paying special attention to the rearranging of leaves and branches behind them. Sagely she explained that the Skygors, when hunting her kind, were thus completely lost. Even at the very doorstep of the Nest, the tangled vines, branches and leaf-sprays obscured any hint of such a place at hand.

The dwellers in the Nest were all women.

They came cautiously forward, twenty or so, as Mara ushered Planter inside. They were active specimens, dressed scantily and attractively, like Mara. Most of them were young, several comely. All were fair of skin and hair, a logical condition in the cloudy air of Venus. They wore daggers, hatchets, ammunition pouches. Even at home, they all carried crossbows.

"What does this man here?" demanded a lean, harsh-faced woman of middle age. "Is he not content with servitude?"

Mara shook her head. "He's like none we know. He fights more fiercely than we—Ecod, shouldst have seen him! Bare-handed, he o'ercame two Skygors. I slew two more. Look at our trove!"

She opened a parcel of great leaves, and showed dozens of the silver pens that were ammunition for both the Skygor pistols and the human crossbows. Planter also showed what he had brought from the battlefield—several belts, numerous harness fastenings, and two of the guns. These latter made the crossbow-girls nervous.

"We stand by these," Mara said, tapping her crossbow.

Planter fiddled with a pistol. Its mechanism was strange but understandable, and he flattered himself that he could learn to use it. As for the pen-missiles, they

seemed to contain a charge that burned violently on exposure to air. The trigger-mechanism, whether of pistol or crossbow, punctured it, set it afire, and the vehemence of combustion not only propelled it but destroyed the target completely.

The older woman, whose name was Mantha, nodded her head over a decision.

"Let the man have the dag," she granted, with an air of authority. "If he fights as Mara says, he may be of aid. Yet he is unlike those we know, in hue and aspect."

True enough, Planter was dark of complexion, with black curls and ruddy tan jaws. He spoke to Mantha, respectfully, for the others called her "Mother" and treated her as a commander.

"I'm not of your people," he said. "I come from another planet. Earth."

"Earth?" she repeated. "You come from there? Why, so do we all."

* * *

Down a trail went a patrol of Skygors. Among them, not much under them in size, tramped Max. His broad shoulders bore a great burden of supplies from the ship. At the head of the procession, next to the chief, walked Disbro.

As someone else was saying to Planter at almost the same moment, the chief Skygor boomed to Disbro: "You are not like men we know."

"Naturally not," agreed Disbro. "Your race is more like a bunch of freak reptiles."

"Not my race," demurred the chief Skygor. "Men. Slaves."

Disbro understood only part, and took exception to that. "I'm no slave of yours," he warned.

"No. Equal. We have long needed equal men, to kill off the wild girls."

"You see, Mr. Disbro?" chimed in Max from behind.

DAVID PLANTER was embarrassed. Inside the Nest, he sat on a crude chair opposite Mantha, the Mother. The overhead light burned dim, and damp-banishing fires in the ovens mingled red glows. Planter asked questions, but was distracted by the crossbow-girls, who watched him with round eyes, whispering and giggling. Mara, near by, scowled at the noise-makers.

"This Venus world has much that's unknown," Mantha said. "Here in the north

can we dwell. Not many days off the steam is thick, the heat horrid, the jungle dreadful. None go there and return."

"Mother, if you are called that, enlighten me," begged Planter. "You say you come from Earth."

"Our fathers came. Lifetimes ago."

Planter's good-looking face showed his amazement. Interworld flight was new, he had thought. But some unknown expedition might have tried it, succeeded, and then never returned to report.

"'Twas for fear of black Cromwell," Mantha enlarged.

"Cromwell!" echoed Planter. "The Puritan leader who fought and wiped out the English Cavaliers?"

Mantha seized on one word. "Cavaliers. Yes. Our lives were forfeit. We flew higher."

It explained everything—human beings in a world never meant for anything but amphibians, their fair complexions, their quaint but understandable speech, the crossbows that would be familiar weapons to Shakespeare, Drake or Captain John Smith. Yes, it explained everything, except how pre-machine age Britishers could succeed on a voyage where eight space-ships before Planter's had failed.

"How did you fly?" demanded Planter, amazed

Mantha shook her graying locks. "Nay, I know not. 'Twas long ago, and all records are held in the Skygor fastness."

"They stole from you?"

"After our fathers made landfall, there was war," Mantha said, her voice bitter. "The Skygors were many, and would have slain all, but thought to hold slaves. And as slaves our fathers dwelt and died, and their children after them."

"But you aren't slaves," protested Planter.

"'Tis Skygor fashion to keep all men, and such women as are hale enow for toil. Others who seem weak they cast forth to die, like us!"

"Who did not die," chimed in Mara, plucking her bowstring. "We found fruits, meat, shelter, and joined. Now we slay Skygors for their metals and shot. Lately they slay weaklings, lest they join us."

Planter whistled. This was a harsh proof of human tenacity. The Skygors discarding unprofitable servants and finding them

a menace. "None of you are weaklings," he said.

"Freedom brings health," replied Mantha sententiously. "Yet they are many more than we, well fortified, and have a strange spell to whelm those who attack." She grimaced in distaste. "We but lurk and linger, fighting when we must and fleeing when we may. As the last of us dies—"

Things began to happen.

A tall, robust girl, very handsome, had been hitching her woven chair close to Planter. With a pert boldness she touched his hand.

"I've seen no man since I was driven forth, a child," she informed him. "I like you. I am Sala."

Mara rose from her own seat, swore a rather Elizabethan oath, and slapped Sala's face resoundingly.

Sala, too, sprang up. Larger than Mara, she clutched her assailant's shoulders and tripped her over a neatly extended foot. Mara spun sidewise in falling, broke Sala's hold, came to her feet with a drawn dagger.

This happened silently and swiftly, with none of the screaming and fumbling that marks the rare battles between Terrestrial women. Planter stared, half aghast and half admiring. Another girl whispered behind him: "Let them fight, send them ill days! Look at me, I am not ugly."

Perhaps to flee this new admirer, Planter threw himself between the two fighters. As Mara attempted to stab Sala, Painter caught her weapon wrist and wrenched the knife from her. Meanwhile, Sala snatched up a crossbow. Leaving Mara, Planter struck the thing out of aiming line just in time. The pen-missile tore through the basketry wall of the Nest, and Planter gained possession of the crossbow, not without trouble.

"Are you girls fighting over me?" he demanded.

"Egad, what else?" challenged Mantha, who had also sprung forward. "Art a man of height and presence. For any man these my manless girls would contend."

"Aye, would we," agreed one of the bevy, with frightening candor.

"He's mine," snapped Mara, holding her own crossbow at the ready. "Step forth who will, and I speak true."

"I'm nobody's," exploded Planter. "Anyway, I'm going—I've two friends near

here that I've got to find, and soon!"

"More men!" ejaculated Sala, forgetting her anger.

"Fighters, with weapons," said Planter, ignoring her. "They'll help you smoke out these Skygors and set free your kinsmen."

Happy cries greeted his words.

"I'll guide you home, David Planter," offered Mara, and Mantha gestured approval.

Mara and Planter left the Nest by a new jungle trail. Mara explained that these tunnels were made by great floundering beasts, and served as runways for smaller land life. The girl trod the green, fog-filled labyrinths with assurance. Within minutes they reached the pool where Disbro had landed the ship.

At the edge floated the limp, dead thing that Mara had killed to save Planter. Small flutterers, like gross-winged flies but as large as gulls, swarmed to dig out morsels. Mara called the creature a krau, the flying scavengers ghrols. "Skygor words, for ugly beasts," she commented. "Neither is good for food."

Planter picked his way from root to root toward the ship. "Disbro!" he called. "Max!"

There was no answer. He scrambled up and inside, then out again. "Something's happened," he said gravely.

Mara studied the massed logs that made a rough raft. "Skygor work. And eke the rope of wires about your ship."

"They've been captured by Skygors? For slaves?" Planter had climbed down again. His hand sought the Skygor pistol at his belt, his face was tense and pale. "I'll get them back. Where's this swamp-city you mention?"

She pointed. "Not far. But the way is perilous. The trails throng with Skygors, and there is the spell."

"That sounds like some old superstition," snorted Planter. "I'm not afraid of Skygors. I killed two today."

"Aye," she smiled. "They are not great fighters in these parts. But there are more than two at the city . . . come along."

"You can go back to the Nest."

She smiled more broadly. "How else will you find the way, my David? For you are my David."

"Don't start that again," he bade her, more roughly than he felt. "Lead the way."

MARA took a nearby jungle trail. After some time, she paused and studied the matted footing. "Tracks," she pronounced. "Certain Skygors, and two pairs of feet shod like yours."

Planter looked at the muddled marks thus diagnosed by the skilled trail-eye of Mara. "My friends and their captors?"

"Aye, that. They went this way. Come."

She slipped aside through the close-set stems. Planter did likewise. Mara slung her crossbow behind her, and climbed a trunk as a beetle scales a flower-stalk. "'Tis safer from Skygors up here," she told him over her shoulder "Follow me carefully."

Planter did so, with difficulty. He was a vigorous climber, and the lesser gravity of Venus made him more agile. But Mara, some forty feet overhead, swung through the criss-cross of limbs and vines like a squirrel. "Wait!" he called, striving to catch up.

She paused, finger to lips. As he came near, she said softly: "Not so loud! We come close. Feel you the spell?"

Hanging quietly, Planter did feel it.

Uneasiness came, chilling his back despite the steamy warmth. His hair stirred on his head, his teeth gritted, and he could not reason himself out of the mood. Mara moved ahead, and he followed. Growing accustomed to the climbing, he made progress. But the uncomfortable sense of peril grew rather than diminished.

Once in their strange journey Mara paused, and from a belt-pouch produced food. It consisted of fire-dried fruits, strange to Planter but tasty and substantial; also two meat-dumplings, made by wrapping a nut-flavored dough around morsels of flesh. For drink she plucked long spear-like leaves from a vine, and Planter found them full of pungent juice. While they munched, he heard boomings in the distance, which Mara identified as Skygor speech.

"We are almost there," she whispered. "Look well."

She rose, and again they took up the journey. After a time she paused again, and pointed.

Just beyond them the branches thinned out over a great open space in the jungle. Under a far-flung canopy of white vapors lay the swamp-city of the Skygors.

PLANTER, gazing in wonder at the strange city, thought of old Venice, or of a beaver colony in a diked pond. Before and beneath him was a quiet greeny-clear body of water. Around its rim grew shrubs, bushes and huge reeds, their roots clasping the great facing of white rock which apparently paved the banks and bottom of the pool. In the water itself, poking above the surface in little pointed clusters and plainly visible where they extended beneath, were the houses of the Skygors.

They were of some kind of soil or clay that had been processed to a concrete hardness, and were tinted in various colors. Some of the smaller dwellings were roughly spherical, and crowned with cone-shaped roofs. Others, larger, protruded well above the water in cylindrical form. Here and there travel-ways connected the clustered groups.

But it was beneath the surface that the town was complex and great. It seemed to lie tier above tier, closely built and grouped, with here and there protruding arms or wings of building, like coral budded from the main mass. In those depths swam myriads of Skygors, plainly at home under water. More of them, at the window-holes of the upper towers or paddling on the surface, boomed and roared to each other in their deafening language. From on high, Planter saw them as smaller and less to be dreaded. They might have been slight fantasy things, water-elves or super-intelligent frogs.

"Look you, David Planter," prompted Mara, at his elbow.

From a tunnel-like hole in the jungle, a group of Skygors emerged. Among them were two human figures, clad like Planter in loose overalls and helmets.

"Your friends?" Mara questioned.

"Right," snapped Planter grimly. He drew the pistol-weapon and glared.

Disbro and Max, the latter stooping under a great bale of goods from the ship, had paused on the brink of the water. A Skygor was thundering to them, in words of English which Planter, across the water, found hard to catch. Other Skygors motioned at the pool, and one or two jumped in and struck out for nearby buildings.

"They want your friends to dive," Mara

informed him. "See, the slim one shakes his head."

Planter rested the pistol on his forearm, and sighted on the Skygor who harangued Disbro. Meanwhile, other Skygors were bringing up what appeared to be a small, inflated boat, that operated with a paddle-wheel arrangement behind.

Mara saw what Planter was doing. "No!" she gasped. "Don't, David!"

"I'm going to," he told her.

"We'll be next!"

"Nonsense! Those flapper-footed devils can't climb! They're too heavy, too clumsy!"

She caught at his weapon wrist, but he had fired.

The Skygor weapon was a wondrous one. Even an indifferent shot like Planter could not miss with it. The Skygor beside Disbro seemed to burst into flame around his flat, bushel-mouthed face, and then he collapsed and lay still. His companions swarmed to his side, rending the air with their horrid yells.

Planter chuckled, and Mara moaned. The man moved forward among the branches, to a place where he could be seen.

"Hai, Disbro!" he trumpeted, as loudly as any Skygor. "Max! It's David Planter! Run while you have the chance, I'll pick those toads off!"

But neither of his friends offered to escape. They only stood and gazed at him.

"You idiots!" blazed Planter, and then saw that two of the Skygors on the inflated boat were aiming weapons at him. He sent a silver pen at their craft, and it melted abruptly as its air escaped from the puncture. A third shot took one of the Skygors splashing in the water. "Run, you two!" Planter bade his companions once more.

He felt a grip on his ankle, and glanced down. Mara had crouched low, was trying to pull him back from view. As soon as she had his eye, she let him go, and thrust both fingers into her ears in some sort of a sign he did not comprehend.

Understanding dawned suddenly, and too late.

The mist trembled and swirled at a sudden outburst of sound louder than even a Skygor chorus. Planter dropped his weapon, began to lift his hands to his

ears in imitation of Mara. But he could not!

The noise possessed him, as a rush of electric current might course through a body, paralyzing and agonizing it. He swayed and floundered among the branches. His hair bristled, his ears rang, his blood coursed, every fiber of him vibrated. Yet something about it was vaguely familiar, as though it was something he had experienced, or a magnification of such a something.

Yes, of course . . . the uneasiness that Mara called the "spell." Some device made a noise-vibration, normally sub-audible but unpleasant enough to warn aliens away. In a time like this, when attack came, it could be intensified to the point of striking the enemy stupid.

Meanwhile, he was falling, through branches and leafage, to splash clumsily into the water of the pool. Abruptly the noise ceased. The Skygors were around him, their flipper-hands fastening upon him, and he was too wrung out, too grateful for silence, to resist.

HE may have fainted. Later on, he could not be sure. But his next clear memory was of lying in one of the inflated paddle-boats, in which sat Skygors with weapons. There also sat Disbro, watching him intently.

"Disbro!" muttered Planter. "They got you, too?"

"No, they didn't get me, too," mimicked Disbro. "I'm in the racket with them, understand?"

Planter sat up, and two Skygors half-drew their weapons to warn him. "I thought you were captured," he mumbled.

"Not me. I do things neatly. Showed I could be an enemy, but would rather be a friend. You butted in, killing two of them. Someone says you got two others earlier today. They're holding you a prisoner, and probably you'll be killed."

Planter studied Disbro. "Easy does it," he said softly. "Better not act as if you know me. You might get mixed up in—"

"No chance!" snarled Disbro. "I told them that you were an enemy of mine. I'm not mixed up in anything."

Planter subsided. Plainly Disbro was able to take care of himself. Plainly Planter must do the same, with no help

from anyone. He wondered about Mara, with a sudden chilled pang. The brave girl had guided him here, despite her knowledge that Skygor country was dangerous. She had done it to please him, because she liked him. He wondered what had happened to her.

He lounged under the Skygor guns, thinking of Mara. In his mind he saw the light of her steady blue eyes, felt the touch of her slim, strong hand. His heart quickened.

"Hang it," he told himself, "you aren't in love with her. She's a savage, and you only met her a few hours ago! You're only worried because you feel responsibility."

But he knew he lied.

The boat brought them to an entrance-hole at water-level, in a large cylindrical structure. Disbro swaggered inside, with his new friends. A guard prodded Planter with his pistol-barrel to follow. As Planter obeyed, he saw behind him another boat, in which rode Max with all the baggage he had been carrying. Skygors sat with Max, plainly on good terms. Max saw Planter, too, and his face twitched and scowled as in an effort to rationalize.

Inside, he found himself in a large bare room with dry, rough-cast walls. Disbro waited there, with a Skygor whose elaborate chain-mail suggested that he was an officer.

"Disbro," boomed this individual cordially, "You say this is your enemy? What shall be done to him?"

"I leave that to you, Phra," answered Disbro, with the grand manner of bestowing gifts. "You have your own ways of handling such problems. I am content."

Another Skygor approached, and the officer discussed the case in deafening Skygor language. Then, facing Planter, he resumed English:

"Your life is forfeit, but you look strong. Perhaps you can prove yourself worth keeping. Join the slaves."

He struck his webbed hands together. A human man ran in.

Like Mara and the other crossbow-girls, this man was blond, but the resemblance ended there. He wore loose, brief garments of elastic fabric, no weapons, and his face was mild and servile. Phra pointed to Planter.

"Below with him! Put him to the spring mill!"

The slave beckoned, and led Planter away, studying him curiously.

Planter spoke at once: "You have many friends here, in slavery? Perhaps I can get you out of this."

"Out of this!" The echo was horrified. "To starve in the jungle? Marry, sir, art mad or sick to say such a thing! Come, down these stairs."

PLANTER obeyed his new companion. They went down a dim, stone stairway, lighted with green bulbs. From below came sounds of mechanical action.

"What's your name?" Planter asked the slave.

"Glanfil. And you?"

"David Planter. How many slaves are there here? Human slaves?"

"Two hundred, belike. Half as many as the Skygors."

That was a new thought to Planter. On Earth, races were numbered in the millions—here, by the scores. Of course, this might not be the only Skygor city. Mara had mentioned the difficulty of exploring any distance from this habitable pole. For a moment he felt the thirst for knowledge. Wasn't this world as large as his own planet? Might it not have continents, oceans, mountain ranges, whole genera of strange species, perhaps other civilizations and climates? Then he remembered. He was a slave. And a booming voice drove the memory home.

"Below, men," thundered a Skygor guard. "You are not fed and lodged to be idle."

"Pardon," mumbled Glanfil, and quickened his descent. Planter followed, beating down a rage of battle at the rough shouting of the guard.

The under-water levels were not flooded, though the walls were gloomily damp. Planter found himself in a great rambling chamber, bordered and cumbered with machines, at which men toiled. Glanfil was presenting him to a Skygor, who made notes with a crayon-like instrument on a board. "New?" he questioned in his ear-dulling roar. "Whence came he? Never stop to answer—show him how to work your machine."

Glanfil led him to a cylindrical appli-

ance against a wall. It had a multitude of levers and push-buttons, and lights shone in its glassed forefront. Most of these were green, but one turned red as they approached. Glanfil pushed a button and turned a lever. The light switched to green again.

"The red means a faulty rhythm somewhere in the light system," explained Glanfil. "Fix it by manipulating the buttons and levers near the red lights—yes, so. It takes not skill, but wary watching."

Planter took over. He found time to observe the rest of the slave-teemed basement.

Some operated a treadmill, others wound at keys or turned cranks. The machines were strange but not mysterious. He judged that they pumped, elevated, and modelled. Glanfil answered his questions:

"'Tis the Skygor method. We supply power by our labors. Springs, levers, such things, are worked."

"Springs and levers?" repeated Planter. "Is this a clockwork town? Why not fuel? Steam?"

Glanfil shook his head. "We men make small fires, but the Skygors not. Their nature is moist, they want such things not. As you say, clockwork is the use of this place."

"If you refuse to do this slave work, what then?"

Glanfil shrugged, and shuddered. "If the sin is not too great, you go to a level below this. Men drag upon a capstan, to wind the mightiest of springs for town works."

"Like rowing in a galley!" Planter summed up wrathfully. "But if the sin is pretty sinful?"

A Skygor overseer came close, saw that Planter had learned the simple machine, and called Glanfil to some other task. Planter worked until such time as a raucous voice bade another shift take over. Marshalled with twenty or more slaves, he was led away to a musty vault, one side of which was lined with cell-like sleeping quarters. Here was a brick oven—perhaps those in the Nest were designed from it—over which two sturdy women toiled at cookery. As the slaves entered, these women quickly passed out stone plates and metal spoons. Into these were poured generous portions of hot, appetizing stew.

"They feed you well, these Skygors,"

commented Planter to Glanfil as he finished his plateful.

"'Tis their fashion. They seek to make us happy."

Planter went to the kettles for another helping of stew, and ate more slowly. "I'd rather eat in freedom," he commented, half to himself.

"Freedom?" echoed Glanfil, as if scornful. "We hear of what freedom can be. Scant commons, rough beds, danger and damp. Better to toil honestly and fare well."

"Aye," said a bigger slave, with a spade beard of reddish tinge. "Did not the Skygors help our first fathers, stranger, as now they help you?"

"I've heard otherwise," Planter rejoined. "It seems there was a fight—the men were licked—the survivors made captive and put to work. That's what happened to me."

"Best be silent," murmured Glanfil, bending close. "That talk makes few friends."

PLANTER changed the subject, asking various questions about Venus. His companions eyed him strangely as he displayed his ignorance, but made cheerful answer.

The noise that had overwhelmed him was a vibrating metal instrument, they said. Their description made it sound like an organ of sorts. As he had surmised, it was always in some sort of operation, and could be turned on full force if need be. The Skygors, with senses meant to endure great noises, were not hurt by such a din, but human ears would be tortured if not quickly closed. "Our labors give the instrument power," informed Glanfil, rather proudly.

Planter thought over his experiences of the day. "The Skygors have many human devices," he ventured.

"Aye, that," agreed the big bearded one. "In the first days, our fathers brought many articles, which the Skygors developed and used."

"There's what I'm driving at!" Planter broke in, forgetting Glanfil's counsel to be cautious. "They not only enslaved you, they took your ideas and improved themselves. I'll wager they were savages to begin with! And you're actually grateful

for the chance to crawl at their big, webbed feet!"

"This world belongs to the Skygors," spoke up one of the women as she washed dishes. "Without them we would be shelterless and foodless, like the weaklings they drove forth."

Planter refrained to tell what he knew of the crossbow-girls. Plainly he was up against an attitude of content from which it would be hard to free his new companions—harder than to free them from guards and prison walls.

He slept that night in a hammock-like bed, and next day worked at the machine. His toil was long, but not sapping, and food was good. Once a Skygor came to take his clothing, shoes and possessions, giving him a sleeveless shirt and shorts instead. Otherwise he was not bothered by the masters of the city. For days—perhaps ten—he followed this routine, masking his feeling of revolt.

Then came a Skygor messenger to lead him away along underwater corridors to someone who had sent. At the end of the journey he entered an office. There sat the person he least expected to see.

Disbro.

"You rat," Planter began, but Disbro waved the insult aside.

"Don't be a bigger ape than usual," he sniffed. "I've been able to do you a favor."

"You didn't do me much of a one when I was captured," reminded Planter.

"How could I?" argued Disbro, in the charming fashion he could sometimes achieve. "I was only on probation. If I'd tried to help you then, we'd both be dead, instead of both on top of this Turkish Bath world. Sit down." They took stools on opposite sides of a heavy, wooden table. "Planter, how would you like to help me run Venus?"

"You're going to get away from these Skygors?"

Again Disbro waved the words away. "Why should I? I'll run them, too. Look, we landed safely, didn't we? Observations on Earth will show that, won't they?"

"Right," agreed Planter, mystified. "There'll be more ships coming, to look for us and maybe set up a colony."

"That's it. We'll ambush those ships."

"Ambush?" repeated Planter sharply. "Losing your mind, Disbro?"

"No. I'm only thinking for all of us. Ships will come, I say. Loaded with supplies, valuables all sorts of things. We can overwhelm them as they land. Some of their crews will join us—the others can be rubbed out. And the law can't touch us, Planter! Not for a minute!"

"What are you driving at?" Planter demanded.

"I'm the law," said Disbro, tapping his chest. "Just now I string with the Skygors. Later I may knock 'em off. But anyway, I'm the commander of the first expedition to land on Venus. I have a right to take possession, in my own name." He got up, his voice rising clear and proud. "Possession, like Columbus! Not of a continent—of a whole world!"

PLANTER, leaning forward on his stool, clutched the edge of the table so strongly that his knuckles whitened.

"And what," he asked slowly and quietly, "do you want me to do?"

"I'm coming to that," said Disbro, smiling with superior craftiness. "You're going to help me solidify these loud-mouthed Skygors."

"They hold me for a slave," reminded Planter harshly, for he did not like the life as well as Glanfil and the others who toiled among the clockwork. But Disbro brushed the complaint aside.

"That's because they don't know what I know. Your lady friends, I mean."

Planter glanced up sharply. Disbro chuckled.

"I talk a lot with these Skygors. Not bad fellows, if you muffle your ears. Anyway, they tell me about a herd of wild girls that bushwacks them constantly, and which they hope I'll find and destroy. Lately some of those girls have been scouting around, yelling for something. The Skygors haven't the best of English, and don't know what the words mean. But I do. Those girls are calling your name, David Planter."

Mara had come back for him, then. She braved the terrors of the Skygor fortress, trying to get him back. Planter felt warmth around his heart. He faced Disbro and shook his head.

"I don't know what you're talking

about," he said. "You must be getting drunk with your Skygor friends."

"They don't have any kind of liquor, only some sort of sniff-powder I wouldn't touch. And you're a cheerful liar, Planter. You know all about those girls, and you're probably good friends with them. Don't be a fool, I'm offering you a slice of my empire!"

"Empire!" echoed Planter, honestly scornful. "You really think you'll go through with this idea of grabbing Venus for yourself?"

"I know all the angles. Back on Earth I was boss of quite an organization."

"And ended up in jail, buying your way out by gambling your life on this voyage!" Planter rushed those words into speech, but made them clear, biting and passionate. "You're a case for brain doctors, not jail wardens. I don't know why I listen to you."

"I know why," hurled back Disbro. "Because I'm already quite a pot among these Skygors. I can kill you or save you. Meanwhile, we're changing the subject. I want you to lead me to these wild girls, and after we're solid with them, a bunch of Skygors will come—"

"Nothing doing!"

"In other words, you now admit that there is such a group! And you'll take orders, Planter. I'm still chief of the expedition."

Planter shook his head. "I can give you arguments on that. You've betrayed the trust of the Foundation back home. That lets you out. You don't have authority over me."

He rose abruptly. "Send me back to the basement, Disbro."

Disbro, too, jumped up. He held something in his hand. It was a gun, not a Skygor curiosity but a Terrestrial-made automatic.

"You don't get off that easy, Planter. I need you badly. And you need your insides badly. Knuckle down, before I blow them out!"

Planter smiled, broadly and rather sunnily. Suddenly he lifted a toe. He kicked over the table against and upon Disbro. Down went the elegant, lean figure, and a bullet sang over Planter's head as he dived in to grapple and fight.

Disbro, the lighter of the two, was

wondrously agile. Almost before he struck the concrete floor, he was wriggling clear of the table. Planter's weight threw him flat again, but he struck savage, choppy blows with the pistol he still held. Half-dazed, Planter could not get a tight grip, and Disbro got away and up. Planter, shaking the mist from his battered head, staggered after him, caught his weapon wrist and wrung the gun away. It clanged down at their feet.

"All right, Planter, if you want it that way," muttered Disbro savagely, and took a long stride backward. He got time to fall on guard like the accomplished boxer he was.

Planter sprang after him. Disbro met him with a neat left jab, followed it with a hook that bobbed Planter's head back, and easily slid away from a powerful but clumsy return. When Planter faced him again, he stood out of danger, smiling and lifting a little on his toes.

"How do you like it?" he laughed. "Didn't know I was a fancy Dan, eh?"

Planter charged again. Disbro slipped right and left tries at his jaw, returned a smart peg to Planter's belly, and then let the bigger man blunder past and fetch up against a wall. Planter was forced to lean there a nauseous moment, and Disbro hooked him hard under the ear. A moment later, Planter was crouching and backing away, sheltering his bruised head with crossed arms. He heard Disbro laugh again. "This is fun," pronounced Disbro. "I've been taught by professionals, Planter. Good ones, not washouts like poor Max."

Planter clinched at last, but Disbro's wiry body spun loose. The two faced each other, and Planter felt some of his strength and wit come back.

He realized that he was being beaten. He must change tactics. He remembered what he could of fist-science, and abruptly crouched. Again he advanced, but not in a rush. Inch by inch he shuffled in, head sunk between his shoulders, hands lifted to strike or defend.

"You look like a turtle," mocked Disbro, and tried with a left. It glanced off of Planter's forehead, and Planter sidled to his left, away from Disbro's more dangerous right. Bobbing and weaving lower still, he baffled more efforts to sting him.

A moment later, Disbro was backing, and Planter had him in a corner, close in.

He struck, not for Disbro's adroit head, but for his body. His left found the pit of the stomach, just within the apex of the shallow, inverted V where ribs slope down from breastbone. Disbro grunted in pain, and Planter put all his shoulders behind a short, heavy peg under the heart. Again to the belly, twice—thrice—he felt Disbro sag. A hook glanced from Planter's jowl, but it was weak and shaky. Disbro managed to slip out of the corner, but Planter was now the stronger and surer. Across the room he followed his enemy, playing ever for the body—kidneys, abdomen, heart. Disbro was hanging on, his breath came in choking grunts. Planter struggled loose, and sank one clean, hard right uppercut.

Disbro spun off of his feet, fell across the overturned table, and lay moaning and gasping.

"Had enough?" Planter challenged.

Disbro was crawling on the floor, trying to grab the pistol. Planter sprang in, stamped on Disbro's knuckles. Disbro had only the strength and breath for one scream, and collapsed.

Abruptly Skygors entered, Skygors with hard eyes and leveled weapons. "What," demanded one, "is this?"

Disbro, helped to his shaky feet, pointed to Planter. "He—he—refused," he managed to wheeze out.

Disbro nodded, and Planter felt a sudden rush of joy. They would drive him forth, as they used to drive forth unprofitable female slaves. And he would find the Nest again, and Mara.

He was being herded along a passage, up stairs. The Skygors who guarded him kept their weapons close against his ribs. "No escape," they promised him balefully.

He wondered at that, but only a little. Now they had brought him out upon an open, railed bridge between two buildings. Below was water, above the thick Venusian mist. "Jump," a Skygor bade him.

"I need no second chance," Planter replied, breezily, and dived in.

He still wore the scanty costume of a slave, and it allowed him to strike out easily for the edge of the pool. Behind him the Skygors were discussing him, but in their own guttural tongue which he

could not understand. As he swam, he studied the city beneath the water.

He meant to come back and assail that city some time, and there must be worthwhile secrets to note. For instance, he was now aware that this pool was artificial—he made out the sluices and gates of a large dam. To one side was a spacious submarine chamber that must be the clockwork-jammed cellar where his erstwhile companions, the slaves, worked.

But something else was under water, something that moved darkly, but had arms and legs, though it was as vast as an elephant. It was approaching him swiftly, knowingly.

Now he knew why he had been told, with such a voice of doom, to jump into the water.

PLANTER'S blood was still up because of that brisk battle with Disbro. He was young, strong, in gilt-edge condition. His new impulse was to keep on fighting, against the thing which had the size, the intention, and apparently the appetite, to engulf him.

The huge swimmer was a Skygor, of tremendous size. Logic in the back of Planter's head bade him not to be amazed; on this damp, fecund world, monsters of such sort were not too unthinkable. As it broke surface, he heard a hubbub like many steam sirens. The smaller Skygors, on house-tops and bridges, were all chanting some sort of ear-bursting litany, waving their flippers in unison. Plainly they worshiped this giant of their race. He, Planter, was a gift—a sacrifice.

He swam speedily, but his pursuer was speedier still. With ponderous overhand strokes it overhauled him. An arm as long as his body, with a flipper-hand like a tremendous scoop shovel, extended to clutch at him. A mouth like an open trunk gaped, large enough to gulp him bodily.

Only one thing to do. He did it—dived at once, turning under water and darting below and in an opposite direction from the great swimmer. By pure, happy chance, his kicking feet struck the soft cushion of its mighty belly, and he heard the thrumming gasp of the wind he knocked out of it. Coming up beyond, he swam desperately toward a nearby build-

ing. If he could climb up, away, from this huge, hungry being.

"No, not here!" That was a Skygor, poking its ugly smirking face from a window-hole. He tried to seize the sill to draw himself out of the water, and it lifted a dagger to slash at his knuckles.

But then it gasped, wriggled. The paw opened, the knife fell. Planter managed to catch it as it struck the water. A moment later he saw what had happened—big human hands were fastened on the slimy throat from behind. The Skygor, struggling, was pulled back out of sight. In its place showed the flat, simple features of Max.

"Huhh!" gurgled Max. "You in trouble, Mr. Planter?"

He put out a hand to help. At the same moment a monstrous flipper struck at Planter, driving him deep under water.

He filled his lungs with air at the last moment, spun and tried to kick away. His enemy had its hooked claws in his clothing and was drawing him toward the dark cavern of its mouth. Planter struck with the knife he had snatched and buried the blade in the slimy-green lower lip of the creature. It let go, and a cloud of blood—red as the blood of Earth's creatures—suddenly obscured the water, so that Planter could attempt another escape.

He reached the top once again. The giant held itself half out of the water, big and grotesque as some barbaric sculpture, one webbed hand held against its wounded mouth. As Planter came into view, its big, bitter eyes caught sight of him. Dropping its hand, it howled at him. All the Skygors at their watch-points echoed that howl and began to repeat their uncouth litany once again. The monster pursued as before.

But from his watch-window, Max threw his burly pugilist's body.

Coarsely built Max might have been. Stupid he undoubtedly was. Cowardly and clumsy he was not. As he flung himself into space, he shifted so that his feet were down. He drove them hard between the shoulders of the huge Skygor demon, and the impact of his flying weight drove it under water.

"Get out of here!" yelled Max at Planter. "Get out!"

He had time for no more, for he, too,

submerged. Planter clasped his knife in his teeth, and turned in the water. He could not desert that plucky rescuer.

LIGHTING itself, the big Skygor grimaced under the troubled, gory surface. It was having trouble—more trouble than ever before in its freakish, idle, overstuffed life as deity and champion of the community. Two alien dwarfs, of a species it had looked on hitherto as only enticing meat, were viciously attacking and wounding it. Hunger was overlaid by a stern lust for vengeance.

It spied one of the enemy very close, swimming away. Max was not as much at home in the water as Planter, and he could not dodge its grasping talons. Treading water, the thing hoisted him clear, as a child might lift a kitten. Its other paw struck him, with openwebbed palm, hard as a mule's kick.

Max went limp. Once again that awful mouth opened to its full extent.

"No, you don't!" cried Planter, battling his way close. For a second time he drove with the knife, sheathing it to the hilt in a slate-colored chest, close to one armpit.

A fountain of blood sprang forth, drenching his face and weapon hand. He dragged strongly downward, felt his weapon point grating on bone, then coming free. That was a terrible wound, but not a disabling one. In a frenzy of pain and rage, the Skygor giant threw Max far away into the water, and whirled to look for its other tormentor.

But Planter had dived yet again. The fresh blood obscured his passage as before. He came up, panted for air, and seized the limp wrist of Max. As he kicked away for shore, he heard the whine and *splat* of a missile.

The Skygors were shooting at him.

He bobbed under, bringing Max with him. As he fought through the water, he felt his friend quiver and beat with his hands. He felt fierce joy. Max was alive, he too, would escape. He had to come up.

"Duck down, Planter," Max told him at once. "They're going to give us another volley."

His voice was suddenly intelligent, his words sensible and articulate. Planter took the advice, swam forward again.

"Shore's that way," said Max, when they

came up. "Can you make it? Give me your hand."

The ex-pugilist was climbing over a tangle of roots, to solid ground at last. Planter made shift to follow him.

"What—happened—" Planter barely whispered.

Max laughed, very cheerfully. "What a wallop that sea-elephant has! I guess it knocked my senses back into me. Another belt dizzied me back on Earth. So it's logical that—"

Yes, logical. . . . Max was no longer a dim, stupid child in a big man's body.

Planter felt himself weakening. He had fought himself out. Even as he turned toward the jungle, he stumbled and fell, rolled over on his back.

He could see the whole surface of the water-city. Skygors were coming in throngs to recapture him, crowded aboard their inflated boats, or swimming. For ahead of them, something like an awful goblin was scrambling out—the mighty freak he and Max had dodged up to now. It stood erect on powerful, awkward legs, its eyes probing here and there to pick up the trail of its prey.

Planter tried to tell Max to run, but his strength and breath were spent. He could only lie and watch. Max had torn up a kind of sapling, whirled it aloft like a club. The tottering colossus approached them, heavily and grimly. It grinned relentlessly, its bloody muzzle opened and slavered.

Out of the jungle moved another figure. A smaller Skygor? No—*Mara*!

She sprang across the prostrate form of Planter. He managed to rise to an elbow, just as she planted herself in the way of the oncoming destruction. It loomed high above her, paws lifted to seize and crush her. But she had lifted her crossbow.

Pale fire flashed. The string hummed. At a scant five feet of distance she slammed a pen-missile full into the thing's immense chest.

It staggered back from her, its face gone into a terrible oversize mask of awful pain. Those great legs, like dark, gnarled stumps, bowed and bent. It fell uncouthly, supported itself on spread hands. Planter could see the hole Mara had burned in it, a great red raw pit the size of a bushel

basket. Then it was down, motionless. Dead.

Max had helped Planter up. "Can you run?" he was demanding.

"No! No!" Mara interposed, hurrying back to them. "Not run! Fight!"

"Fight?" Planter echoed, rather idiotically.

"Fight the Skygors! See, your friends have come!"

Through the jungle to the water's edge pressed other human figures, in Terrestrial overalls and helmets.

A SLIM, square-faced man in the neatest of overall costumes had grabbed Planter's elbow. It was beginning to rain again. Thunder sounded, like Skygors grumbling high in the mist. "Quick!" said the square-faced man. "You're Planter, aren't you? And that other man—but where's Disbro?"

Planter pointed toward the water-city. "Who are you?" he demanded, as if they had all day.

"Dr. Hommerson. Commanding this new expedition. Ten of us in the big new ship started when they reported you landing safely. We cracked up, not far from where your ship bogged down. This girl found us, said—"

"Whatever she said was true!" cut in Planter. "Quick, defend yourself against those Skygors."

"They'll defend themselves against us," rejoined Dr. Hommerson bleakly. "If they're smart, and if they're lucky."

His companions had formed a sort of skirmish line among the thickest stems at the water's edge. With a variety of weapons—force-rifles, machine guns, one or two portable grenade throwers—they had opened on the Skygors.

The amphibian dwellers in the water-city had started to chase Planter and Max, but the destruction of their giant kinsman had daunted and immobilized them. Now they had something else to shake their courage, which was never too great. Well-aimed shots were picking them off, in the boats, in the water, on the housetops and bridges.

"Don't show yourselves more than is necessary!" Dr. Hommerson was barking. "If they know there's only a handful of us, they might—" He unlimbered a patent

pistol, one with a long barrel, a magazine of fourteen rounds in the stock, and a wooden holster that could fit into a slot and form a makeshift butt like that of a rifle. Lifting this to his shoulder, he began to shoot at such of the Skygors as still showed themselves.

Mara had rushed to Planter's side. "They're retreating!" she cried. "The spell—remember the *spell*!"

True enough, he'd forgotten. That wild, unmanning storm of noise that defended Skygor country, that had knocked him into their webbed fingers as a captive and slave, might begin at any moment. Even now the Skygors were retiring inside their buildings, but with a certain purposeful orderliness. As Planter watched, Max ran up to his other.

"She's telling the truth. I know all about that thing they sound off," he said breathlessly in his new, knowing voice. "When I was with Disbro—working for him—I had a look at it."

"Stop your ears," Mara was bidding. "Quick! A tag from your garment will do!"

She ripped away part of Planter's shirt, tore the piece in two, and thrust wads into his ears with her forefinger. Max was plugging his own ears. Then the sound began.

When it began, nobody could say. Suddenly, it was there, filling space with itself as though it were a crushing solid thing.

Planter, even with his ears partially muffled, almost collapsed. His body vibrated as before in every fiber, only not unendurably. He saw Max reel, but stay on his feet. Dr. Hommerson's men, a moment ago almost in the victor's position, were down, floundering in half-crazy agony. Planter understood, in that rear compartment of his mind that was always diagnosing strange things, even in the moment of worst danger.

The Skygors were ill-cultured, poor of spirit, prospered chiefly by ideas stolen from the human beings they enslaved. But they understood sound waves, could use them roughly as an electrician might use electric vibrations. There were all the tales he had heard, of a chord on the organ that shattered window panes, of certain orators who could employ voice-frequencies to

spellbind and impassion their audiences. This was something like that, only more so.

Then he saw that Mara, who had thought of saving his ears, was down at his feet.

"Mara!" he cried, though nobody could have heard him. He knelt, ripping away more rags of his shirt. He crammed them furiously into her ears. She stirred, got to her knees. She, too, could endure it now, and she smiled at him, drawnly.

"I knew you would come back," her lips formed words. "David Planter—my David Planter—"

Then she was up, crossbow at the ready.

Because back came the Skygors, a wave of them in boats and as swimmers. Sure of their victory through sound, they were going to mop up the attackers.

Max had a rifle. He lifted it, but on inspiration Planter leaped at him and gestured for him to hold fire. From beside one of the fallen Terrestrials he caught a grenade thrower. It was a simple amplification of an ordinary rifle. Upon the muzzle fitted a metal device like a bottomless bottle, the neck clamping tight to the barrel. Into the spread body of the bottle could be slid a cylindrical grenade, the size and shape of a condensed-milk tin. The grenade was pierced with a hole, and the gun, if fired, would send its bullet through that hole, while the gases of the exploding powder operated to hurl the grenade far and forcefully and accurately.

PLANTER had never used one, but he had seen them used. A quick check showed him that the rifle's magazine was full. From the belt of the fallen man he twitched a grenade, slipped it into place. He knelt, placed the rifle butt on the soggy mass of rotting vegetation that made up the shoreside jungle floor. By guess, he slanted his weapon about forty-five degrees forward. The foremost press of Skygors approached.

Bang! At Planter's trigger-touch, the grenade rose upward. For a moment the three conscious watchers could see it, outlined against the upper mists at the hesitating apex of its flight. Then it fell, too far to demoralize the first ranks of Skygors, but smashing two inflated boats in its explosion and tossing several slimy-green forms like chips through the air.

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Planter slid in another grenade, worked the rifle-bolt, and raised the weapon to his shoulder.

It spoke again, louder even than the din of the noisemaker Mara called the "spell." This time it struck water among the leading Skygors, and exploded on contact. Three or four sank abruptly, several more thrashed the water into pinky-red foam in the pain of bad wounds, the rest wavered.

Now Max opened fire with his rifle, and Mara with her crossbow. Both scored hits, and the Skygors gave back. Something was going wrong, they were realizing. The destroying sound was not paralyzing their enemy. Meanwhile, it was best to take cover. Some ducked under the water, others fell back toward the buildings.

"Dynamite 'em!" cried Planter, forgetting that he could not be heard. Stooping, he stripped away the whole beltful of grenades from its helpless owner. He whirled it around his head as though he were throwing a hammer on an athletic field, and sent it flying out over the water. The shock of its fall into the depths set it off—all grenades at once. Skygors came bounding to the top, twitching feebly. The explosion had destroyed them, as fish are destroyed by the shock of detonating dynamite in nearby waters.

Then the paralyzing noise stopped.

Hommerson was the first man up. He was dazed and groggy, but fight was the first impulse that woke in him. Mara, Max and Planter dragged others to their feet, shook and shouted their senses back into them.

"They're retreating!" Planter yelled. "Let's counter-attack!"

Close in to shore drifted one of the abandoned boats. Max had run into the water, dragging it closer. The Terrestrials tumbled aboard, and one of them got the paddle-wheel running. Planter, at the bow directing fire at any Skygors who showed their heads, saw that Mara had not come along. He worried a moment, then worried no more. She was shouting in the jungle, and other voices—feminine voices—answered her. More of the crossbow-girls were coming to help.

The boat made a landing at the building where Planter had first been dragged to

slavery. It was not made for defense, and the invaders split into small parties, ranging the corridors and outer bridges. Planter, hurrying downstairs, heard the *spat* of the Skygor pen-missiles, with the replying crackle of gunfire. After a while, Mara and other girls began to shout and chatter. They had also found a boat and had come over.

On the floor, above the basement where the slaves worked, he came face to face with a Skygor, who lifted his arms appealingly, in the surrender gesture that must be universal among all creatures who have arms. "I want no fight," begged this one. "You are master."

"Then come downstairs," snapped Planter. He clattered down, among the slaves. "Stop work!" he bawled, almost as loudly as a Skygor, and the men, bred to obey big voices, did so.

"Outside!" was Planter's next command. One or two moved to obey, others hung back.

"Outside," the surrendered Skygor echoed Planter, and they came obediently. Planter hurried them to their quarters, then slammed the door to the big workshop.

"That closes down your power plants," he commented to the Skygor. "Now, quick! Which way to the controls of the dam?"

"Dam?" the Skygor repeated stupidly.

Planter caught the green shoulders and shook the creature roughly. It was larger than he, but cowered. "I will show," it yielded, and led him away. In a nearby corridor were huge handles, three of them, like pivoted clinker-bars. Planter seized one, pulled it down. He heard waters roaring. He pulled another.

"You will drain the pool," protested the Skygor.

"I want to drain the pool," Planter said.

"Then—" The Skygor caught the third lever and pulled it down.

Planter hurried upstairs again. His prisoner kept at his heels.

"Why did you help me?" he asked it.

"Because you conquer," was the booming reply. "The conquered must obey."

"I think you believe that stuff, like the slaves," Planter sniffed.

"Of course, I believe," responded the Skygor.

From the upper levels came Hommerson's voice:

"Planter! This frog-folk are giving up! They haven't any fight left in them!"

But Planter paused, on a landing. He looked into a small office, where two human figures stood close together.

One was Max. The other was Disbro. Max had Disbro by the throat, not shaking or wrestling him. Only squeezing.

"Max!" called Planter. "Why—"

"Why not?" countered Max plausibly. "Planter, I think maybe you were the thick-headed one. You always tried to get along with Disbro, as if he was honest. I was a crazy-house case, but from the first I knew he was wrong. It took the return of sense to understand that the only thing to do was this."

He let go, and Disbro fell on the floor like an empty suit of clothes.

Max brushed his hands together, as if to clear them of dust.

"I wonder how long I've wanted to do that," he said. "Let's go up and watch the final mop-up."

OUT of the mud pool where once a snake-armed krau had pursued Planter, the combined strength of many arms was hoisting the bogged ship. Cables had been rove through pulley-blocks at the tops of the biggest and strongest poolside stems. Free men of Venus, once slaves, hauled on these cables in brief, concerted rhythms. Here and there in the rope-gangs toiled a Skygor, accepting defeat and companionship with the same mild grace. Women — free women — laughed and encouraged, and now and again threw themselves into the tugging labor that was a game, Max oversaw everything.

Near by, machete had hewn a little clearing. Here a waterproof tent over a beehive framework sheltered Planter and Dr. Hommerson. They watched as the ship, its bow-rockets toiling to help the tugging cables, finally stirred out of its bed.

Hommerson smiled. "Time to hold a sort of recapitulation, isn't it? As in old-fashioned mystery yarns, when the case is solved and the danger done away with? Of course, it all happened suddenly, but we can say this much:

"The Skygor mistake was that of every

softened master setup. They had a half-rigged defense against mild dangers, and never looked for real trouble. They beat that Seventeenth Century space-expedition simply because Terrestrials of that day hadn't the proper weapons. Otherwise, man might have been ruling here for four hundred years and more."

"The Skygors did have one tremendous device," observed Planter. "That super-siren that deadens you by sound waves."

Hommerson laughed. "And which providentially did what all clockwork mechanisms are apt to do—ran down. It's dismantled now, anyway. We're a fuel-engine civilization, and the Skygors will have to wonder and admire a while before they steal our new tricks."

Planter fingered another trophy of the battle, a great brass-bound log book, old and yellowed, but still readable. "This answers more riddles," he put in. "The record of those ancient fugitives from Cromwell. Who'd have thought that their times could produce a successful flight from planet to planet?"

"It was a great century," reminded Hommerson. "Don't forget that they also invented the microscope, the balloon, the principle of maneuverable armies. Their century began with Francis Bacon and ended with Sir Isaac Newton. That rocket fuel, which the Skygors only half understood and used for ammunition—"

"Doctor!" broke in Planter. "Do you remember the old Puritan tales of witches, flying on what seemed like broomsticks?"

"And Cyrano de Bergerac, in France about 1640, writing a tale of a rocket to the moon? We simply forgot that they had something then. The real complete knowledge flew here to Venus, and waited for our age to develop it again from the beginning."

It was so. Planter pondered awhile, and while he pondered one of the expedition came in to make a report.

"We can send back three in this ship when it's set," he said to Hommerson. "Who are you taking, sir?"

"These two who survived the earlier flight, Planter and his big, tough friend. The rest of you can wait and develop a landing field."

Planter spoke: "Did you see the girl called Mara out there?"

"She was watching us," said the man. "Finally she went into the jungle."

"With no message for me?"

"No message for anybody."

"Dr. Hommerson," said Planter, "pick someone else instead of me. Here I stay."

Hommerson looked up sharply. "Until the next ship comes?"

"Here I stay," repeated Planter. "From now on."

He sought a certain jungle trail, one he had traversed before. "Mara!" he called down it.

She was not hard to catch up with, for she was not walking fast. As he came alongside, she looked at him with eyes too bright to be dry.

"You came to bid goodbye," she suggested.

He shook his head. The mist seemed less than ever before on Venus. "No. Never goodbye."

"Isn't the ship leaving?"

"Leaving, all right. But not with me in it. This is home now."

She looked down at her sandalled feet, and one hand played with the dagger in her belt. "Methought you would be glad to regain Earth."

"Earth? Other people gained it long ago." He pulled her hand away from the dagger-hilt. "Stop fiddling with that stabbing-iron, there's no fighting to be done just now."

"You said I was yours," he told her furiously. "You said it just as if you'd won me in a game of some sort."

"And you brushed it aside without answering me. You had none of it."

"Hang it, Mara, a man decides those things! And I've been deciding them. You're the bravest creature I ever knew—the most graceful—the most honest. You did love me once. Have you stopped?"

"I have not stopped," she said. "But why have you waited to say these words?"

"I haven't had time, and I'm going to have little time for a while, what with organization and building and food-hunting and colonizing. But—"

Her mouth, close at hand, was too delectable. He kissed her fiercely. She jumped away, startled, then uttered a little breathless laugh.

"That likes me well," she told him. "Let us do it again."

THE RINGER FAMILY



"SO LONG, SARGE! AND IF YOU EVER WANT TO SEND US A MESSAGE JUST TIE IT TO THE STORK."

Guy Gifford



THE VIZIGRAPH

INSTEAD of having fewer good letters to print in the current issue we seem to have more. Instead of the VIZIGRAPH gently contracting it seems to be spreading like one of those protoplasmic monsters. So, Mister, what do you think is the best thing to do this time? Go an extra page—once more? Okay, Mister. Twelve it is. But let's not change the title from PLANET STORIES to PLANET LETTERS. Incidentally, we are forced to cut many of the following letters—with real regret.

In the Spring Futurity: 1—Conway, 2—Maxwell, 3—Conover.

CONFESSIONS OF A JIVE ARTIST

458 East 51st St.,
Brooklyn.

DEAR MISTER:

Comes time for to give out with a bit of spiel—

FIRST—AS TO WHO I AM— Me? I'm just a screwball entertainer who knocks about from town to town—country to country making with the smiles— Dig me Mister—

SECOND—AS TO WHY I'M POUNDING THE TYP— Why? 'cause you're cooking with gas Mister— Never in all my reading of Joe Miller and otherwise have I come across anything with more *KICK* to it than your Mag— Talk about being out of this world—Mister—your stories really take off and stay up—

THIRD—AS TO HOW I BECAME AN S.F. FAN— How? Well, it's between shows— Mister— I'M stretched out on my pad as usual—We're on a hop—skip and jump tour of South America— Pops Cartwright—one of the boys in the band—is sitting in the only comfortable chair in the joint reading— It's raining like all H—I out. Did you ever see rain in Santos, Brazil— Mister it really comes on—

I'm tired of watching flies get stuck on the flypaper so I starts a conversation with Pops— Now Mister he's one Gee who hates to be bothered while he's reading—don't we all— So I've got to figure out some way of keeping the conver—flowing— So I talks to him about the Mag. he's got his nose in. I know this will keep him all hopped up, Mister—

"Pops—" says I— "How in all H—I can you read that Super Science stuff? As far as I can see a Gee has got to take the pipe or smoke the 'weed' to get in the right frame of mind for that junk."

Mister, that did it. Pops jumps up and almost down my throat— "Why you son of a no-good Martian flying Toad—for two ries I'd—"

And then he stops and a gleam comes into his eyes. Mister to us what knows Pops that gleam means trouble—but this time, somehow, things turned out different. He became calm Mister—

"Flocko"—he says— "When I finish this swell book I'm going to make you read every word of it from cover to cover—and if —when you've finished you honestly say you don't like it I'll eat every page of it without salt—"



Mister, that sent me. I took him on— Boy would I enjoy feeling that gate your Mag— page by page— How could I enjoy anything like a trip to Mars in six easy lessons?

Mister you know I'm kind of happy that I didn't tell Pops that I would eat your Mag if I did like it—cause Mister I'd still be eating— Never did like a diet of paper anyway—. Tho' I imagine a feed made up of your Mag wouldn't be so bad at that—.

Well Mister that's the Who—Why and How of it—. I'm an addict now—and I don't mean of the "weed"—strictly S.F.

I'm back in Brooklyn now where I can read my favorite jive stuff as much as I want to—and you can rest assured Mister that on my next tour I'm taking all the S.F. reading matter I can lay my hands on, particularly PLANET STORIES—

Dig me Mister— Dig me—

Bob "Flocko Batidor" Roberts.

DIG ME MISTER

DEAR MISTER FLOCKO:

Fine stuff, your letter. I sure enjoyed the digging, Mister. For a screwball entertainer you do all right.

As is the case with all vice peddlers, a new victim gives reason for rejoicing. But that isn't all. No, nor the twenty cents, though it's always welcome. What counts most is an admission from a bright guy with your brand of humor that he came to scoff and stayed because he liked it. Being in the entertainment racket yourself you know the pleasure that goes with a solid send. Thanks Mister. Come again.

THE ED.

MAD ENOUGH TO BITE

178 Point View Rd,
Brentwood, Pitts, Pa.

DEAR EDITOR:

So far I've kept silent, and maybe it's a good thing I did. Many times though I've felt like writing in and complaining, but I never got mad enough. BUT I'M MAD NOW!

What's the big idea? Where are those familiar little planets I'm so used to seeing dashing merrily across the cover?

I've seen many lurid, ghastly and horrible covers in my time, but this one takes the cake. I had gone into a store to get PLANET STORIES. I searched the racks of fiction, but I could not see it, and then horrors of horrors I saw it. Ugh—double ugh. I could hardly believe my eyes. There it was.

Across the bubbly, blue sky or is it water? I saw the strange, plain letters PLANET STORIES. Across a background of pink pumpkins growing on hills was a . . . bull dog, faced, octie-a-puss with the measles, wrestling with a blonde (or is he pushing her down that manhole?) Ed, that is toooooo much.

But then I consoled myself with the old saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover." I shelled out my two dimes, mindful of the looks and smirks of the other customers, and stumbled out with PLANET clutched in my arms.

Well I've read the stories, and filed them, so here goes:

1. The Star-Mouse—Fredric Brown—Wonderful, original and swell, but those illustrations PHOOEY! As someone said before Lynch should be lynched. I thought I was looking at fairy-story illustrations.

2. "The Ballad Of Venus Nell"—Nelson S. Bond—Ah, my favorite poet, keep it up, but slip in a few of those humorous stories, now and then. What do you say?
3. "The Last Martian"—Raymond Van Houten—Very good, interesting and a good ending. Some martian you got there Mr. Morey, but I expect him to fall over any minute. How can he stand on those feelers he has for legs, or is he carrying a gravity-repulsion gadget under that cloak?
4. Black Friar Of The Flame—Isaac Asimov—Not so bad, but it might have been better. Nice illustration, Paul.
5. "The Thing Of Venus"—Wilbur Peacock—About fair, but I think Val Kenton should have got the girl, he tried hard enough. But then it was a very good dramatic ending. Gosh, Mr. Morey couldn't we readers have gotten just a little peek at this "Thing Of Venus," instead of "Old Faithful"?
6. "Pied Piper Of Mars"—Frederic A. Kummer, Jr.—Fair. Leydenfrost is not so bad inside, but keep him off the covers.
7. "Child Of The Sun"—Leigh Brackett—Amusing but confusing. Any way I liked it. Leydenfrost (say, that guy must have some powerful, bad nightmares). Just what does he put in those combination sandwiches he eats, before going to bed?
8. "Gods Of Space"—Ray Cummings—It wasn't as bad as some of his other stories he has been writing lately. Musaccia's illustration is about fair.

Well, I guess I've said my bill-full. But do put those planets back again, they give your magazine a personality. Oh yes, I want to congratulate you on the Vizigraph, it's swell. Do excuse the mistakes I know I've made, but I'm just a green, sixteen year old gal, trying out her wings in stf. (Or should I say rockets?)

Very sincerely,

BERTHA R. GOEMPEL.

COMPLAINT CONCERNING OUR CITRUS CROP

1362 Dean Street,
Schenectady, New York.

DEAR EDITOR:

Gorsh! I'm writin' muh first letter to a mag n' I've forgotten all I was goin' tuh say! I had it all memorized n' boy, I mean! It would've put Asimov, Mrs. Wells, Gifford, etc., to shame. But, I guess I'll have to do the best I can without it, perfect as it was.

Well, first on your star parade was, as always, the Vizigraph. All the SF writers in the world couldn't cram that much originality, variety, and interest in ten pages. But still, I—oh, you want me to rate the stories. Well, there's nothin' like trying, so here goes:

Asimov rides again! "Black Friar Of The Flame" did all right by itself, even if I do say so myself. It got off to a bad start, but pulled itself up enough to earn first place. I guess we'll have to give Mitkey Mouse and Brown the nod for second place with "The Star-Mouse." It was just plain good all the way through. Third comes "Pied Piper Of Mars." It was okay, I'll even say it was good, though down the ladder a rung. Bond does a pretty bit of work with "The Ballad of Venus Nell." Pers'nally, I think he writes better stories than he does poems, so please, Mr. Bond, stick to stories, will ya? Fifth and sixth places go to "The Thing of Venus"

and "The Last Martian" in either order you want to put them. The stories were good up to this point, but here's where I guess I'll have to draw the line. "Child of the Sun" was bad, and poor Cummings—down again. Listen, Ray, this is for you:

Roses are red,
Carnations are pink;
As an SF writer,
You certainly ———!

Now to the art department. That cover by Leydenfrost was *art!* Gosh whiz, where's he been all PS's life? His interiors were also art. Also perfect was Paul. Next in order were Lynch, Musacchia, and Morey. I'll allow you to can all three, though, and give us back Bok.

Last but not least, comes the Vizigraph. In win, place, and show order come Maxwell, Stoy, and Shaw. Plenty other good letters, but none so perfect. Incidentally, you can thank Larry Shaw for getting me interested in PS. He and I are in the same class at school, so he had plenty of chance to work on me (and he did).

Well, promise me plenty of Bond, Mosky, Paul, and Leydenfrost in the summer ish and I'll promise to be back too.

HARVEY MARCY.

SOMETHING SURPRISING—LETTER, SPOOK AND AUTHOR COMBO

509 S. Grand View
Los Angeles, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

Yesterday I saw the current PLANET. I rubbed my eyes but it was still there. That thing on the cover, I mean. And I swear, I hadn't had a drink all day. I immediately, needless to say, shelled out 20¢ for it. Mr. Editor, you've outdone yourself this time. Where on earth or *how* on earth did you get hold of Leydenfrost? I know he's done drawings for Life and is now doing them for Blue Book. This current cover of yours is superb! Pardon, I mean superb! No, I mean colossal, stupendous, swellegant!

Ah well, why go on? I'm living right here next to Hollywood where adjectives come a dime a dozen, but the adjective hasn't been invented yet that could describe my feeling when I saw this cover. And his two black-and-whites are even better in their respective field—without the slightest doubt the best you have yet obtained with the possible exception of a *few* of the Boks. I'm just praying now that this sort of thing may continue!

But now a terrible fear oppresses me. It suddenly dawns on me that I am writing unto you a letter. And I've got to get serious, very serious. This has got to be a damn *good* letter. It's got to be good enough in fact to win me one of those Leydenfrost's. But ah, me, how to do it! Look, editor. I can't write letters. I very seldom write letters. Can't I be allowed, say, a ten yard head start or sumpin'? How can you expect me to compete with all these professional letter-writers?

Already I can picture dozens of 'em, all over the country, buying PLANET, taking one look at Leydenfrost and then making mad dashes home to their typewriters. That's why I'm getting this letter off to you early, and by Air-Mail!

But, migosh, what *does* one put into a letter? Look, Malcy old kid, couldn't I just write you a four-thousand word story instead? Wouldn't that get me a Leydenfrost? No—I thought not. Well,

let's see. Hmmm. The readers seem to like humor. Ye Ed. seems to like humor. Everyone likes humor. Let's see what I can do with a little humor—maybe that'll get the readers into the proper mood to vote for my letter.

A bunch of the ghosts were whooping it up in the corner cemetery. That was because they had some spirits with them. One ghost said to another ghost: "Do you believe in humans?"

And the other ghost said: "Die? I thought I'd laugh!"

And another ghost said: "Yeah, but we're still patriotic Americans. We ought to get together and boo-st national defense."

Whereupon the first ghost said: "Sure, we could have a ghost to ghost hook-up."

"My, isn't it black-out?" said another, looking toward Los Angeles. "It's a good thing we're painted white. These blackouts are enough to make my flesh creep, if I had any flesh."

"As it is," said a fourth ghost, "it's giving me ghost-pimples."

Just then they spied a slim little female girl-ghost. "Hi, toots," said the first ghost to the fem-ghost.

"Spook when you're spooked to," she replied, giving them the cold shoulder (with potato salad; pie 5¢ extra).

"That just ghost to show you," said the third ghost. "She can see right through you."

"What are you doing?" said the girl ghost.

"Having fun. Come on, get in the spirit of it."

"I can't," she said with a shudder, "it's too eerie out tonight."

"Maybe that's because you came from Erie, Pennsylvania, ha ha."

"No, I came from Scranton."

"Really? How do you like Pennsylvania?"

"Well, I like Scranton, but I've had my fill a delphia."

"Hey, look," said the third ghost, waving a bottle, "here come a trio of our friends across the cemetery, three sheets in the wind."

One of the newcomers said: "I hear there's a new ghost haunting Pico Blvd. now." (Note: that's in L.A.)

"Really?"

"Yeah, he marches up and down Pico Blvd. every midnight. They call him the Pico 'Boo.'"

"That's nothing, I hear that the Martians have landed on Earth, and they have six arms!"

"The Martians on Earth? You're kidding!"

"Well, they must be Martians, or Venusians or something; I just saw the headlines, and it said, 'Six armed men hold up bank.'"

There, youse guys. Now do I get a Leydenfrost? I don't, huh. So you don't like my humor. Neither do I. But at least it's no worse than Finn's "pynth feathers"—of which, I assure you, Finn will never hear the last. O, gosh. I'll have to try something else. A story maybe! I'll write a story especially for the Vizigraph.

Dr. Lawton kept his hand carefully near his atom pistol as he watched the Venusian. E'eezleblub lumbered over to the corner. With a gangling, eel-like arm he twisted the visipanel dial.

"I say, old jap," mused Dr. Lawton, "how did your arm get so eel-like? And why *wood* you lumber into a corner?"

"It's nothing," said E'eezleblub, taking out his left eye and absently polishing it on the lace curtains over the porthole. "I used to have fins too, but they made me look too fishy." He paused while he took his eye and tried to socket back into place. Lawton was caught off guard. Suddenly the Venusian made a sudden movement, all

of a sudden. But his eye dropped out. "Parden my sudden accident," he apologized.

"Oh, suddenly," replied Dr. Lawton.

Oh, hell, youse guys, I give up. Look, Conover, I'm voting for your letter for first place, see? Look, Lesser, I'm voting for your letter second, see? Look, Stoy, I'm voting for your letter third, see? Look, editor, please give Conover and Lesser and Stoy the pics they want, see? Not that I'm suggesting any of you should reciprocate by voting for me—ha. Perish the thought—ha ha. Not much, I'm not—ha ha ha. Why, I wouldn't even think of mentioning that I have some type-scripts of original manuscripts that I'm thinking of giving away—ha ha ha ha.

Still, I don't want to end this letter yet even though it is growing to tremendous proportions. Because in the back of my mind lurks the thought that there's *something* I've left unsaid. Now what could it be? I wonder. Hmm. Think hard, Hasse. Hmmm. It's coming, it's coming. Ah! Now I know. The stories! Yes, I went and read each and every story. Curious habit of mine.

So, I intended to say that *Child of the Sun* is not only the best in the issue but the best I can remember in all my experience of PLANET STORIES reading, and that's been considerable. You really should be proud to get such a well *written* story, and honestly I'm not saying it just because the author is a localite. But the Brackett gal really can write. Picturesquely, vividly.

Und now to der Professor und Mitkey der Star-Mouse ve must giff der secondt blace, nodt? Yes! A very glose secondt blase. Ve vant some more of der Mitkey micen type of stories, do ve nodt? Yess! Vodd all of der szience-viction mags und specially PLANET STORIES needs is more of der humor, nodt? Budt yess! Blease see if maybe der Vredric Brown gouldn't giff us ein zequel to this Mitkey micen business, nodt? Yeah, man!

Und now giffs it to der—oops, sorry, but now Brown's godt me doink idt! To *Pied Piper of Mars* goes third place. It was a considerably above-average story, which I liked despite an abundance of "piper" stories in the various mags lately. (Here's a minor point, but I wish either Kummer, ye Ed, or the proof-readers would learn how to spell "terrestrial." Three "r's." It's a word Kummer likes to use, I know because I've seen it in more than a few of his stories but always mis-spelled.) Oh, you're welcome, Frederic, think nothing of it. It happens to all of us.

Fourth to *Black Friar of the Flame*, slightly above average I guess. Would have placed higher were it not that I personally never cared a great deal for Galactic stories, huge space armadas battling to save the Solar System, etc. Reminds me too much of the early days and Campbell and Hamilton.

Of the remaining stories all were average save one which was 'way below and I won't tell you which one because you already know.

That's about all, except that one certain thing seemed wrong with this issue. It took me a long time to figure out what it was, but then it dawned on me. I missed the usual story by that—uh—his name seems to have escaped me for the moment, but you know who I mean. Oh, yes—Hasse. And just as I was getting used to his stuff, too. Ah well, maybe one next issue, huh?

Oh, and before I forget: gosh, I'd like the *Child of the Sun* illustration! Gee, I'd like the

Pied Piper one. And jiminy crickets, I'd like the third Mitkey one.

Sincerely,

HENRY HASSE.

STGAFPIVET

Lidgerwood, N. D.

DEAR EDITOR:

I bought the Spring ish of PS and ran home with that superior speed and agility born of slipping in the bathtub. Then I laid it on the table and departed for about fifteen minutes.

During that time my younger brother placed it under his upper lip to stop a nosebleed, so I will not comment on the cover other than to say that it was where it should be—on the outside of the mag.

The best story in the issue was "Black Friar Of The Flame." It was almost as good as Asimov's letter.

Next is the "Star-Mouse." Lynch's drawings for this yarn were the best in the mag, but that is mainly because they were humorous.

Third and fourth are "Child of the Sun" and "The Ballad of Venus Nell." The rhythm of the latter gets me. Fifth is "The Last Martian"—but why such a title?

That brings us to the Vizigraph. Number one place goes to Asimov. I would hereby like to announce officially the formation of the STGAF-PITVET—Society To Give Asimov First Place In The Vizigraph Every Time. You see, the Vizigraph isn't complete without him, and we want him to have a good reason for coming back with more.

Second goes to Conway and third to Knight. Hey, Izzy! What do I have to call you before you dedicate part of a letter to me?

Adios,

ROY PAETZKE.

Ed's NOTE: What does a guy have to do to get into STGAFPIVET, besides voting for Asimov of course?

BOND FOR LAUREATE!

Box 214,
Winnsboro, La.

DEAR EDITOR:

HOORAY! YIPPIE! THE PLANETS ARE GONE. And I mean just that. The new issue of PLANET STORIES was so super that it is just amazing. The soaring Planets are gone and what a cover. What a cover! Pardon me while I breathe. Now if I can just get my mind on this typing I'll try to write the quarter-yearly missle. The new cover-artist is grand. His style is suggestive of Bok's without the sand-paper finish and the vague outlines of the B.E.M.

Leydenfrost's interior styles, yes I said styles for he definitely has two, are half & half. One is good the other stunk. Good one for "Pied Piper of Mars" by Kummer. Bad one for "Child of the Sun" by Brackett. Paul as usual was the best artist in the issue and as usual Lynch the worst. When is it going to dawn upon you that Lynch should be *canned*.

Now to the best part of the mag, the Vizigraph. Every issue it is so much better than the last that it is simply amazing. Ha! Eleven pages this issue. You say that this is the last time it is to be enlarged and I agree with you. After all I am supposed to buy the mag for the stories and not the letters. But the Asimov and Asenion business is getting boring and pardon please but what is a ZWILINK. I never did find that out.

Say, give Asimov a sucker and the other feudists a lolly-pop and send them home. "Ike" writes good stories but the letters unless he is in a serious mood are simply terrible, not from the writing viewpoint but the theme they run in.

Now down to the real reason for writing this letter—the stories. I'll just enumerate them in a row:

"The Last Martian" by Van Houten—No. 1.

"Black Friar of the Flame" by Isaac Asimov—No. 2.

"The Child of the Sun" by Leigh Brackett—No. 3.

"The Star-Mouse" by Frederic Brown—No. 3 (Very good).

"The Thing of Venus" by W. S. Peacock—No. 4.

"Pied Piper of Mars" by F. A. Kummer—No. 5.

"The Ballad of Venus Nell" by Nelson S. Bond is in a class by itself. Just as "Blaster Bill" was. Whenever I try to express my thoughts about them I just hit a blank wall. There aren't enough adjectives to express myself. I hereby declare that Nelson S. Bond be known as the *Poet Laureate of Science-Fiction*. If you can do it, feature one of his ballads every issue.

"The Last Martian" by Van Houten was simply *super*. I have never heard of him before and for a short story to take first place in *PLANET* is something unheard of or rather was until this one came along. Description was excellent and so was the characterizing. It made you think you were on Mars and with the parties involved.

Asimov's effort was very good but not excellent. Give the same plot to Binder and there would have been a jim-jam story. Why not give it to Smith someone has probably asked. Well, here it is in plain words: Binder is better than Smith any day in my opinion. Maybe I am a bit premature in saying this because I have not read any of Smith's early stories.

Thank for listenin',
LASTAFAN THOMAS BRACKETT.

SHAW'S SYSTEM EXPOSED

1301 State Street,
Schenectady, New York.

DEAR EDITOR:

Quick, guess who this is? Yessir, it's Larry Shaw, only with a typewriter now. Now I ought to thank you for wading through my terrible handwriting in my first three letters. But that's all in the past; now you'll only have to wade through my terrible typing.

Thanks, too, for the original. And thanks to all the nice people who voted for me. Such intelligent fans.

The cover was very, very lovely. The new lettering is a terrific improvement, thank you. And this Leydenfrost is good, very. What a delightful, delicious, delovely monster, bug-eyes and all. The background is superb, too. (The girl isn't bad, either.) I'm not sure whether it's better than the Bok or not, as I haven't that here to compare, but it's better than all the others.

"Black Friar of the Flame"—some title!—was better than anything Asimov has ever done, including the terrific "Nightfall" in a rival pub. I didn't think Isaac had it in him. That boy is really an author, and some day he will be a great one.

"The Star-Mouse." Well, well, well! Another surprise, and a grand one. In fact, it would

have been the best story in the ish if it hadn't been for "Friar." Some of the best fantasy is written by writers—Imagine that! Some of the best fantasy is written by writers who don't turn to fantasy so often.

I didn't finish "Gods of Space." The name Cummings on a story prejudices me against it before I even start it. I'm afraid that now if Ray does turn out some of his good stuff—and he can—I won't read it.

"The Ballad of Venus Nell" was good. Not as good as "Blaster Bill," but I could still go for more of this stuff.

"The Thing of Venus" was swell. If I ever saw an unexpected ending that was it. Didn't know Wilbur had it in him, either.

"Pied Piper of Mars" was unexpectedly good, too. Nicely done. As was "The Last Martian." A very neat fan story with an invisible plot. No kidding, it was cute!

And "Child of the Sun" was the second worst of all. It reads like a sequel to something; I don't remember. Don't do it again, please.

Give originals to Maxwell, Stoy, and Verity. (No foolin'.) Mr. Conway's letter was very, very good, but then, this "Yeah" stuff wasn't quite original, you know. Or don't you? About women, I sorta think maybe they're here to stay, so if you must have pictures of 'em, go ahead. Of course, I'd rather have space-ships. . . .

Hurry up with "The Ringers." I can hardly wait. Maxwell; well, we do disagree, but then, don't we all? Of course, he is sadly mistaken about Marlow. Nice guy, Marlow. Know what? Oh, you do?

Asimov's letter was better than his story unquote. I wasn't sure about Josephine Morrison until I looked up "lucid" in the dictionary, but she's nice, too. As is Stoy. Gee, why can't we pick the *ten* best? Heiner deserves something. So does Lapin: a mickey finn. If I didn't want to get to bed I'd undertake to untangle this thing of Mrs. Wilson's.

My letters stink. Each is worse than the last. By the way, I'm still, or again, the Hermit. The club has flopped, but there are a couple of nice fans here.

Gosh, I forgot the art! Quickly now. Paul was tops, one of his best. Lynch not bad, especially for "Star-Mouse." Musacchia stinks. So does Morey. Leydenfrost's powerful illustrations were wonderful, more. Where's Bok?

IF, I'll take the Paul or a Leydenfrost.

Yawn. G'night.

LARRY SHAW,
(The Hermit.)

"WONDERFUL CHANGE—BUT STILL LOUSY"

221 Melbourne S.E.
Minneapolis, Minn.

DEAR EDITOR:

Yah-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h!—So for the cover. . . . Him-m-m, that was a bit short, wasn't it? But add a few adjectives such as awful or putrid onto the word, "how," and you'll get the idea. In short—it stunk! After such swell covers as by Finlay and Bok, you must give us this. No more, please. Remember the BeMs. . . .

I had almost gotten used to carrying *PLANET* home held out in front of me . . . but, ugh. . . .

Being a true (?) fan, I usually do not read any stories until after "reviewing" the whole mag. Such was the case this *ish*. Seeing something unusual, namely—Bond's "Ballad of Venus Nell," I began reading same tale. Having started, I

held my nose the rest of the way, and turned to the letter section. Hah! Perhaps, I'd better explain before I launch into any constructive criticism. . . . I'm in a bad mood tonight. And now to criticize the letters. . . .

Heh! . . . First thing I notice, naturally, was Conway's contribution. Yeah!! Ooops . . . if the guy's so bored with everything, why doesn't he just commit suicide, and save the fans the extreme displeasure of reading his letter.

Second . . . Cartoons in STF? (Or comics). Uh-uh! Look at Buck Rogers. . . . It'd be too bad if you wrecked a good fan such as Gifford by letting him draw a comic-strip. Nix!!!

Third . . . Maxwell, ah-h! And not the way you think I mean it, either. "The Macabre One," bah! Is everyone adopting nick-names? But I must agree with the "poor fella" on your Bok cover . . . it was only passable. But don't lynch Lynch! There are few enuff good artists in STF, and Lynch is now getting where he is good. I must agree on the second-time-pics deal, too. . . . Aw, heck, let's move on to the next guy. . . .

Fourth is Rennisons "note." Vurry interesting. Say, what is this? I'm getting to like people. . . . I know! It's the PLANET cover titling! Wonderful change . . . but it still is lousy! Be that blasphemy, doest what thou wilt . . . but I'm stubborn.

But let's get on to Lesser . . . fifth. Nice guy. I'll bet he's the nicest guy he knows! Hm-m-m, Vassals was good, huh? Hack! It's old stuff. Even Doc Smith is getting unpopular with this sort of stuff. Furthermore, I can't find myself rating stories just the way he did. A mag must *really* be good, to be able to contain all the top-notch stories as he claims yours has. It hasn't. . . . For a new mag. you've got 'em all beat, but I don't mind telling you you've got a long way to go before you rate with the old-timers. (And here the ed. rips the letter to shreds, stamps on it, chucks it out the window, and calmly goes on reading the next.) But this just can't continue! PLANET is hyper . . . PLANET is super. . . . Almost! As I said, you're a darn swell *new* mag, but you still have a little way to go before you hit the all-high THE.

On to knight. And which I think is not a typographical error. The small "k" is what I mean. Seems to me damon always signed his name with small letters.

Weak feeling in the knees. . . . I just looked at the cover again, while ejaculating for the second time: Yah-h-h-h-h-h! PLANET is supposed to be a high-class mag . . . definitely not evidenced by this sort of stuff! By the way, Leydenfrost illustrates for Life magazine, doesn't he?—Well, keep him there! The artists you want are: Dun; Hall; Bok (but only for weird and fantastic tales); the artist who did the thing for the Amazon tale in the first ish, get him back, let's see what he can do; Morey; Ed Smalle, quite definitely; Lynch, of course, and Paul; Finlay; Wesso; and Dold. They might be a bit expensive, but what of it? It'd be worth it.

Look—Asimov's back to himself, again! . . . Even the Hermit's dropped his title. . . . Bet the world's coming to an end! But who cares?

Lawd, this letter's getting quite long, isn't it? Oh, never fear, I'll quit it sometime. But I have to announce my fanzine. Name's "TYCHO," will be small-size and only a nickel. Any fans interested, write a poem or somethin', might print it. . . .

Give the letter-credit thusly: Lesser, Maxwell and Heiner, in that order. (Famous phrase, "In that order . . .") None of the letters are as interesting as last ish, but they say something—that counts!

Renll Hopefully,
JOHN L. GERGEN.

BOOTSTRAP CHAMPS

3401 6th Ave.,
Columbus, Georgia.

DEAR EDITOR:

A new cover design and it's much better than those red and green planets flying around. (Yes, the cover so far as the art is concerned is good, but the subject is punk. I just can't like B E M's.

Now, I've got an idea. Why not have a different cover design every issue? Think of the different ways that PLANET STORIES can be written. And let's have some beautiful cover pictures. I personally would rather not have the cover picture from any of the stories.

To improve the cover don't have any printing on it except for the title of the magazine. (Yes, even take off that little thing that looks like the back of a shotgun shell.)

The stories rate like this:

1. "Black Friar of the Flame." I've always liked these far-flung galaxy stories. Nuts to these "the solar system is the limit" jobs.

2. "The Last Martian." Human and Martian get along swell. No ray-gun fights. Good.

3. "Child of the Sun." Good.

4. "The Star-Mouse" and "Pied Piper of Mars."

5. "Gods of Space" and "The Thing From Venus."

6. Bond does fine on stories but I don't like his poetry.

The Vizigraph is just about right. Maybe one more page.

PLANET rates right up around the top if not at the top. I can't make up my mind about which science fiction magazine is best. They're all good.

And just to think that the first issue of PLANET, to me, was the punkest bit of science fiction I had ever seen. Now it's up about the top—great improvement.

Rate the letters of the Spring 1942 issue like this: Conway, Lesser, and Maxwell in that order.

Here's to science fiction, The ONLY fiction.
PAUL COX.

CUMMINGS IN NO. 1 SPOT

California, Pa.
225 Second St.

DEAR SIR:

I don't love anything or anybody. Maybe I'm out of this world in saying that, since all those others who help make the Vizigraph larger seem to be in a loving mood these days, but nevertheless, I'm a hard hearted bloke and I DON'T LOVE ANYBODY!

W. Kermit Conway III, Hah . . . Yeah . . . Phooey . . . I don't like his style . . . and that moniker . . . who does he think he is to sport a name like that . . . the King of Mesopotamia? And to think that you place his letter in the lead spot. Why Ed., I write much better letters than that tripe signed W. Kermit Conway III and some of them have never seen print. So what? Maybe I'm wrong. . . . Eh? I don't think so. Well . . . Humor . . . he says we want humor . . . why? I don't like funny stories. . . . I'm a pessimist. . . . Darned if I'm not going

into that screwy style myself . . . don't let it happen . . . please don't . . . please . . . ah . . . And he says readers can vote for his letter . . . Hah! Sure, and give us more wenches . . . I like 'em.

So much for the brick bats. Now for the stories. . . Rating: (Apples and oranges added together to get some NUTS for Thompson. Where is he?)

1. "Gods of Space"—Cummings came through, as he always does. He's out of the robot rut. Keep it up Ray and you'll stay at the top of my list. (I wonder if writers read THE VIZIGRAPH?)
2. "The Thing of Venus"—Only one fault to find with this yarn; why wasn't the THING finished off by the great power of the digestive juice of the monster crabs?
3. "Child of the Sun"—This one was so different that I am forced to give it third place in the face of the fact that I thought the plot was terrible. What we need is a variety, and we surely haven't been getting it.
4. Nelson S. Bond's "The Ballad of Venus Nell"—After all, she was sure to fall and that's not empty prose. Give us more like this, and Ed. I'll kiss you smack on your beer-red nose.
5. "The Last Martian"—Not bad. That Earthman surely knew his oil, didn't he?
6. Asimov came through and rated himself something more than last place.
7. "Pied Piper of Mars"—I read half of this one.
8. "The Star-Mouse"—Humor . . . pah! I didn't even start this one.

Illustrations: Beginning with the cover; I think this fellow Leydenfrost is going to become one of the best. His interiors are well done. He probably read the story after he did the cover. That THING on the cover is anything but protoplasm. And another thing; it never did get the girl in its slimy clutches. It was never near the ship and . . . but what's the use. . . Leydenfrost must first read the yarn and then make the pics. I like him.

Paul . . . why . . . why . . . why, did you ever throw such a thing together? It's one of the worst that you ever did . . . and let me say that you have done some rather poor stuff, though, as a rule, your pics are fine. None of those swell looking gals in this one. . . Why? Get back on your horse, my friend, and see what can be done about this in the next issue.

Lynch . . . always good, but please give him something to work on. That yarn couldn't produce a good illustration by Finley; and what I mean, that's saying something.

Musacchia. That's the one I want. . . Wanta bet? O.K. Make it a new necktie. That's a bet Ed. (My second choice, if I rate a pic, is Lynch's for Bond's poem. Third, Leydenfrost's for "Child of the Sun".)

Morey . . . I can't seem to like his stuff.

Well, I guess that's about all.

Give a vote to the following in the order named: Maxwell—Shaw—Stoy. Really, I'm going to sign off.

Yours for more pics (for me),

HEINER.

P.S. Here's a few suggestions:

Get Virgil Finley; I know he's a very busy fellow and that his work really runs up into real "dough," but after all, a mag. such as PLANET deserves the best in illustrators.

More of Bok. How about two or three of his pics each issue.

Keep the VIZIGRAPH at least as large as it is now. (Be sure that my letter is in it.)

Make PLANET a weekly publication. What, you say "Impossible?" Well, at least bi-weekly. No? Well, at least monthly. . . I won't go any further than this. . .

A feature yarn by Cummings illustrated by Leydenfrost . . . say, now. Wouldn't that be something?

So long again. . .

VAUGHAN RALF HEINER.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Thanks for the suggestions. Here's what: (1) Finley awfully tied up with his newspaper work. Will try to get more from him. (2) Bok is concentrating on writing. We hope to publish some of his stuff shortly. (3) Thinking of freezing Vizigraph at eleven pages. (4) When we get enough readers will make PLANET a monthly. (5) Cummings and Leydenfrost—might do.

"SUPERB . . ." SAYS STOY

140-92 Burden Crescent,
Jamaica, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

One thing about PLANET—it's amazingly inconsistent as regards stories! In one issue the level of the stories approaches excellence; in the next the level slumps surprisingly low, almost to the borders of hack . . . and so it goes. However, there is an important point that can be gleaned from this seemingly continuous cycle: at the end of such a cycle the improvement in stories is found greater, and the slump less than that of the preceding phase. So, all this devious reasoning results in the same conclusion that a more direct approach would have come to—that PLANET is going places fast . . . anyway you look at it! "The Star-Mouse" certainly takes first place in the issue. Despite its brevity, Brown has written a humorous, yet stirring tale that will long be remembered in the realms of science-fiction. Such excellent s-f shorts are rare indeed, and perhaps the most difficult of all the various forms of the short story . . . but Brown has instilled in this yarn that indefinable "something" (which even Poe or Maugham failed to cover completely when they listed the necessary attributes of a good short story) which is the prerequisite for greatness.

Alas, poor Mitkey!

Isaac the Incomparable manages to grab second place with "Black Friar of the Flame." Ah, shades of Smith and Binder! Asimov has done better, but this is still a pretty good yarn. The ending is a bit too abrupt, though, for complete verisimilitude; it could have used three or four pages more to round out the story.

That melodramatic poem, "The Ballad of Venus Nell," comes panting at the heels of BFOTF to take a close third place. Though I normally dislike poetry, Bond has overcome this prejudice with a good piece of work. It does seem, though, to bear a vague resemblance to one of Bret Harte's more or less lurid yarns.

"The Last Martian" places a close fourth. Simple plot, but Van Houten's excellent treatment has created a good short. Mebbe other reasons why I liked it are its presentation from the alien viewpoint, and the constructive (rather than destructive) spirit of the tale.

None of the other stories are really poor, not even the Cummings one . . . which is just medi-

ocre. And that, according to Heiner, oughta make me "out of the ordinary."

Considering the cover drawing alone, I'd say that the Leydenfrost pic is as excellent as the preceding Bokaricature. But, taking into account the new title design, I think that the cover as a whole is far superior to any of the preceding nine. For that design is just the thing that's been needed. Simple, mebbe even dignified, but more striking than the old one. As a newsstand-scanner of long standing, I can testify to the new design's effectiveness in drawing the casual gazer's eye.

As for the interior, Lynch seems to have done the best illustrating. He must have had a field day drawing for "The Star-Mouse" and he's done a swell job on those pix . . . certainly enhancing the story's humor. Leydenfrost also has done some fine drawing—his work reminds me somewhat of Bok's. Incidentally, I knew I had seen his distinctive signature somewhere before, but for the Life of me I couldn't figure out where, until I read the Feature Flash! As for the other artists, Paul is as good as ever (yes, I think Conover's "nostalgic" would fit Frank R.), while Morey still seems rather sloppy, and newcomer Musacchia poor.

Coming to the Vizigraph, I shudder at the thought of picking the best missives . . . or missiles. First place is pretty easy; that goes to Conway for his original and novel style. I fervently hope, though, that this style doesn't become a fad. Second place is kinda hard to pick; I think Rennison deserves one, though. And Macabre Maxwell barely manages to beat out Lesser and Conover for third place. *Someday* I'll get good enough for me to rate myself.

There's one simple remedy for over-large letter sections: have PLANET go bi-monthly! This would mean two more Vizis per year; besides, almost none of the "regulars" would write six times a year.

So Asimov has finally realized what a bunch of supermen us PLANET-readers is! It's about time! Seriously, that idle sentence of his set me to thinking (though some of my college instructors might deny the validity of this assertion). Most of the Vizigraphers seem cut from the same pattern, even if they do disagree on a few minor points (frinstance, magnanimous little me is even willing to forgive such as Heiner and Maxwell for their enthusiasm over Cummings!). Well, so why can't we get together in some kind of organization? Why not? And I'm not thinking of some purposeless correspondence club or listless type of s-f organization as formed in three fantasy and s-f mags!

I toss that crumb of an idea to the readers for what it's worth. Mebbe it'll give someone else an idea, then someone else, and so on . . . til something comes of it. I hope so!

RPH!

BILL STOV.

GET A LOAD OF GIFFORD!

539 Raphael St.,
Los Angeles, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

Allow me to be the first of the third million to compliment you on the new cover format. Nice. Yeah.

Would have written sooner but have been in the hospital undergoing an operation. Brought home what was left of me yesterday and am trying to put it to work.

They didn't give me an anaesthetic as the doc decided I hadn't come out of the ether given me when I had my tonsils yanked—some years ago.

I think the doctor used a bolo knife. I know he carved his initials just beneath the incision. I remember him remarking, "Being an artist you'll appreciate me signing my work."

And the hospital.

The nurses were all business and homely to boot. The food was dished out with an eyedropper. It was quite a shock to lift a heavy, twenty-inch cover and discover a teeny, weeny, sliver of bacon cooked to a nice charcoal black. You could hear the chef holler "Timber," through the whole building, when he pulled that dry toast out of the oven. The humming bird egg served each day for breakfast was always cold. The coffee and the soup were taken from the same water faucet.

The nurse who bathed me was studying to be a chiropractor. When I manage to get my right leg down from around my neck I'm going to send it to her. Lawd knows I'll never be able to manipulate it again.

The fellow in the next bed talked all day and groaned all night. On the third day I had hysterics so they tied me down. Then my ward fellow told me all about how he used to tie roasts in a butcher shop.

I still feel like a rump roast.

Well, mebbe I am.

In a final desperate effort to shut him up without hanging I let him read PLANET STORIES. He was absorbed for three days. Reading it over and over and I found out what sleep was once more. Then it started all over. He decided to tell the stories. Over and over. Finally the other patients in the ward gave vent to their suppressed desires and the whole thing ended in a big bed-pan battle.

The last I saw of the gentleman was when they carted him off to surgery to get a white can with a long rubber tube off his head.

He looked like a space-pilot.

This guy Conway is the best of your letter staff. Yeah. Nice style. Nice senzahumor. Conway's clever. Conway's contagious. Like hiccups. Like belching. Yeah. Good grief. Gifford's got it. Got in Himmel. Wifie's worried. Kids scared. Yeah. Mother-in-law moving. Yeah.

Asimov's story good. Knows his business. His letter was weak. Took half a column to say he doesn't like publicity. I can remember when it was, "I don't care what you say about me just so you spell my name right."

Larry Shaw wants to be analyzed. Dangerous. And how. I went to get a doctor's examination and was hypnotized into a cutting scrape.

Remember. Your Vizigraph is your best bet, and the best bet in Science Friction today. Keep it sizzling even if the writers have to kill each other.

Yeah.

GUY GIFFORD.

THE LOW-DOWN ON WHAT REALLY DIDN'T HAPPEN

Springsboro, Pa.

DEAR EDITOR:

I'm writing pronto, as Asimov would say in his quaint drugstore cowboy way, to compliment you on the finest cover yet. Also to explain to all the lads and lassies who were puzzled over a certain stinkeroo in the Winter Issue—the name was "Queen of the Blue World"—

what it was all about. Incidentally the author is related to me, and he is *almost* six feet tall! I go back three months. . . .

"I read your story three times already," I tell him, "and I still am groping in the fog."

He yawns and rolls over on the couch. (Most of the time he sleeps.)

"Supposed to have been written by Martian," he mumbles. "This Aroth Hek, the Martian, imagines Earth as populated with monsters. . . . Was trying to kid some of our own theories about other worlds. Aroth Hek was lost in the editorial scramble somewhere and the story idea washed up."

"But. . . ." I begin.

"Go 'way," he says, "I wanta forget it all."

Uh-oh, I see that wastebasket coming up! I'll be good, Mr. Editor, if you'll forget that I even hinted that editors might make mistakes!

Asimov is by far the best author to contribute this issue, if we except Nelson Bond's super ballad. Bond is, and will probably always remain, my favorite author. But in the story realm Asimov takes top honors. In other fields I am still wondering. . . . Seventy-five did you say, Isaac? Auctorial license is it? . . . By the way I liked the shading and subdued colors of the cover, and wonder of wonders, by all the crimson plant virgins of Cummings, the ringed planets are gone! You really have an attractive cover—best yet—and the gal is nothing to sneeze at. The old WEIRD TALES featured many a Brundage cover that could not equal this one. Lock up this Leydenfrost—don't let him get away! He is Paul, plus Finlay, plus Bok, plus, if he, can keep it up. And from the pictures I've seen in LIFE I think he can. Yessir our mag is really climbing. Compare the first few issues from your files—what, no files? Better hang on to those PLANETS—and note the improvement.

That jerky, mile-a-second way of writing that Conway affects almost got me down. For Catt's sake give him first prize and dismiss him. Having jumped from stories to personalities again I'll name Maxwell as rating second, I agree that the Viz is the top section of PLANET, and in the third spot we find Mrs. Lucille Wilson, greetings sister, you also like Bond! There, that chore is taken care of!

Vell now, chust in der nextd place we put "The Star-Mouse" and was it ever a chuckly (whew wot a woid) bit of utterly interesting nonsense. It is not the rigidly you-gotta-laugh-at-this-sort of story that some of the stf mags cram down your throat. Good work for Herr Brown! And the "Last Martian" was good enough to follow close upon the mouse's gray heels. Two Martian stories in one issue and both of them good. Leigh Brackett outdid herself this time with "Child of the Sun." And Ray Cummings had a yarn in this issue too; despite the stock villian and the rivers of gore, as usual, it was quite readable. Ray is good when he wants to be, but that isn't often of late years. . . . I sound rather ancient talking like this! Wonder how many of the truly intelligent sex—guess which I mean—read PLANET? From the Viz I would say that almost half of us are members of that division. In fact the men who read PLANET must be above the average in mentality too or they'd be reading TRIPLE HOG-LEG WESTERN. Strictly normal morons do not enjoy fantasy! I know, I've tried to lend some of them stf stories. So we readers of stf

are not *morons*! Aren't you—I mean we—glad to find that out? Hah. Logic bad! Hah!

Sincerely,

MRS. MARGARET WELLS.

METAPHYSICAL REASONING-LA!

711 South Arch Street
Aberdeen, South Dakota

DEAR EDITOR:

Despite the competition of professional perennials like Conway, Maxwell, Gifford, Conover, Shaw *et al*, I feel that I, too, have a right to express my opinion of PLANET STORIES.

First, the Vizigraph. Here's one rag that doesn't skimp on the reader's pages. It's the most interesting part of the magazine; your letters are better than some of your stories.

Take Gifford up on his proposition. His drawings, I won't say art, are corny, but they do show humor. A very funny Guy, Gifford.

A lousy artist like da man Knight has no right to talk about lousy stories, especially since "MOTS" definitely did not rest in that category. I could explain the rings, inertia, and space flight but it would take too long here. However, if he is interested enough to write me, I should be very happy to point out discrepancies in his "metaphysical reasoning," as he terms it. As to the temperature of Saturn, which DK says is about—180 C.: Saturn has a mass 94 times Earth's and a specific gravity .69 of Earth's; from this, it is easy to see that Saturn is indubitably highly gaseous, and therefore, equally indubitably, very hot. Then in direct contradiction to his previous statement, Comrade Knight says: ". . . the atmosphere of Saturn is full of cute little things like ammonia and methane." My, my. And ammonia boils at —33.35 C. and methane at—161 C. Third: ". . . surface pressure . . . on the order of 10,000,000 lbs. to the square inch." Come, come, Mr. Knight. Saturn has a gravity equal to 120% of Earth's, for which I quote the following gravitational acceleration figures (in feet accelerated per second): Earth—32.2; Saturn—38.6. Howinhell would Saturn build up an atmospheric pressure like that? Bub, you been using the wrong encyclopedia. And that'll take care of you.

And now Mrs. Wilson's comparing "Monster of the Asteroid" with a yarn which appeared a few months previously. Haw! Where has she been since "The Girl of the Golden Atom?" And she mentions Ralph Milne Farley's "Radio Man" in the same breath. Sounds like she's tossing a few plugs for a reprint magazine which recently ran it. Treason! Up and at 'em! As to her dizzy time-travel theory—it's plagiarism. It ran in a reader's column in still another PS rival, and was much more neatly put.

Now for the cover, pix, and stories:

Talk about BEMS, Zwilnics, Ghlomps, and Blikles! That'un's a honey as far as that goes. But *la belle femme!* All out of proportion, no figure. *Fui* (that's Latin).

Inside pix. First, Paul's. (Did he read the description of the Lhasinics?) Second, Leydenfrost's for "Pied Piper." Third, Leydenfrost for "Child of the Sun." Fourth, Morey for "The Thing of Venus." Rest mediocre to lousy.

Stories. Here's another new rating system, based on various degrees of heat, in ascending order: "Child of the Sun": —273.1 C. Putrid. "Ballad of Venus Nell": —10 C. Nothing to it.

Not good, not bad. Good rime scheme but malodorous meter. "The Thing of Venus": 0 C. Sloppy idea combined with disgusting characterization. "Gods of Space": 1 C. Isn't it about time someone suggested "cumplings" be used as a common noun synonymous with "hack"? His "beautiful creature" in this one isn't blind like most of 'em, this time she's screwy. "Black Friar of the Flame": 5 C. What a title! Isaac writes with a style that went out with prohibition. "Pied Piper of Mars": 20 C. Corny and hackneyed but fair. From the ending, I would predict that next issue will contain the startling announcement that the popularity of the story demands a sequel. Do I win? "The Star-Mouse": 100 C. That's not humor; it's wit! We rear up on our hind pseudopods and dotingly drool: "MORE, MORE, MORE!" "The Last Martian": Hedy Lamarr. WOW! Reader Maxwell may well add this one to his little black book.

Veddy truly yours,

VICTOR KING.

Ed's. NOTE: In answer to question in final p.p. —It doesn't look to me like you win.

THE MEAT OF THE MATTER

McAlester, Oklahoma
214 West Grand

DEAR EDITOR:

I have been a science fiction fan for nearly a score of years. I find it hard to read any other type of fiction; I don't get the same kick, if you know what I mean. I don't make a habit of writing letters to editors, but I've been threatening to write this one for months; I feel I'm at least as competent to offer my opinions as some of the readers who start their letters like this: "I've been reading your magazine since October, and I thought I'd just give you a few pointers. . . ."

I'm going to take up the art work first, because it's the least important. I'd buy science fiction magazines if there wasn't a picture in them. Of course, good art work adds to the enjoyment of a good story; it makes a magazine more attractive. But I think some fans are too fussy about it; they run the thing in the ground. Your art work ranks with the best; what more do they want! I like your new cover. Glad you got rid of the comets and planets. This Leydenfrost is just what the doctor ordered; he's the best you have. I like BEM'S. I like pretty girls. I like Lynch and Morey. This may be treason, but I don't care for Paul. To sum up: I am perfectly satisfied with your art work.

That doesn't mean that I'm perfectly satisfied with everything in your magazine. Ixnay. I'd like a little more variety. More fantasy. Less poetry; Nelson S. Bond is good, but let him stick to prose. Less monsters that menace the universe. More stories that take us clear out of this solar system and up to the stars.

I like your letter department. I read every letter carefully. I vote you keep this feature, and make it as long as you can. Next to the stories themselves, the Vizigraph is the most interesting thing in your magazine.

And now for the meat of the matter! The reason I buy PLANET STORIES! That's right, the stories. As a whole, I think they are pretty good. "Vassals of the Master World" ranks with the all-time best. You don't ring the bell like that every time, but then I guess nobody could. Moskowitz writes good stuff. Ditto Bond, Brackett, Kummer. Ditto Asimov.

I want to say a word about Ray Cummings. I like his work. He is one of the topnotchers. But I wish he would stop writing like a newspaper headline. I wish he'd quit overworking the word "little." And "off there." Like this: "Weird little world there beneath him. The sun was setting, off there to the west. The little space ship was dropping faster now. . . ." If he would go back to the style he used when he wrote "The Girl in the Golden Atom" I believe he'd get a lot less criticism.

This brings me to the Spring Issue 1942. Cover, swell. Inside pics, adequate. The stories rate like this. No. 1—"Black Friar of the Flame." Not the best story ever written, but it's good enough. No. 2—"The Last Martian." A short, but it's got that certain something. No. 3—"Child of the Sun." Brackett doesn't rehash the old plots. No. 4—"Pied Piper of Mars." Kummer is always readable. No. 5—"Gods of Space." This should have been at least second. But the style annoys me. No. 6—"The Thing of Venus." Well written. But I don't go much for the plot where a Rat turns into a last minute Hero. No. 7—"The Ballad of Venus Nell." Would have made a swell prose story. Shades of Robert W. Service! No. 8—"The Star-Mouse." These last two stories are a tie. And so, goodbye.

Sincerely,

JAMES RUSSELL GRAY.

HEY MR. A—WOULD YOU CARE TO KISS MY WIFE?

28 Normandy Terrace,
Bronxville, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Why?

Why?

Why!

Why do you put the same idiotic creatures on every cover?

Come now, you can do better than that! I didn't mind the lousy, unscientific background, or the "Man from Mars" hero, and the monster was very good, but *wky*, on every cover, the same disgusting, over-exposed dame? I think you should have illustrations of one of your stories for a cover.

Of the inside pics, the best was Paul's for "Black Friar of the Flame." The second best was Lynch's for "The Ballad of Venus Nell." Leydenfrost's and Morey's were good, too, but Morey's for "The Thing of Venus" was awful! All of Lynch's pics for "The Star-Mouse" were in a class by themselves. Let's hope you *never* have any more in that class!

What?

What?

What?!

What has happened to Eando Binder for three issues? Y'know, when a magazine goes for four issues without Binder, I quit buying it.

As for my opinion of the stories, I have only one fault to find. In "Black Friar of the Flame," first, the Tourists were hated (Page 5, lines 3 to 22) then, honored (Page 25, lines 16 and 17).

My rating of the stories goes like this:

1. Black Friar of the Flame.
2. The Star-Mouse.
3. The Last Martian.
4. Pied Piper of Mars.
5. Gods of Space.
6. Child of the Sun.
7. Ballad of Venus Nell.
8. The Thing of Venus.

Comments:

At last you have put some humor into your mag with "The Star-Mouse." "The Ballad of Venus Nell" was O.K. but doesn't begin to approach its predecessor "The Ballad of Blaster Bill." "The Thing of Venus" was simply awful and childish beyond words.

As for the Vizigraph:

Make it longer and take out those terrible Cummings stories. Cummings' only good work is done in novels. Give him a chance to do a novel for you.

The best letter in the Vizigraph was Conway's. Yeah man! And here's a word to Dear Mr. Asimov. I am six foot three. Would you care to kiss my wife? I thought not.

Since this is my first letter to any mag, I'll be stupified to see it in print. Still, stranger things have happened . . . or have they?

CHARLES BELL.

STARTLED PRIZE-WINNER

2302 Avenue O.,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Quote: "Lcasser should kick about a longer Vizigraph! Even if it were confined to one page, he'd probably still cop off the pics." Unquote.

Now that's the kind of gibbish (I mean stuff) I like to hear. It shows that you are allowed to view your own personal opinion without getting "Hunged by the neck until you are kilt dead."

In fact, I agree with you.

I will now like to enact for any person who is still laboring to understand this what happened when the new PLANET, informing me that I had won first prize hit the stands.

The man at the "all in one" store on the corner was yelling the following: "Old junk, tin cans, bottle tops, broken umbrellas, holes from the center of eaten doughnuts, scraps of paper, PLANET STORIES, and other assorted junk." (I would like all fans loyal to PLANET to keep in mind that the above quotation is not of my own making, and hence cannot be blamed on me. I'd also like to say, in benefit of the poor, suffering Editor, that this part of the letter is purely fiction.)

I quickly ran up to the store and purchased the latest ish of P.S. Slowly and with infinite caution, I opened to the Viz. There it was, win-Lesser. I jumped and shouted with unsurpassed joy. And then ran home to inform friends, relatives, and more truthfully, enemies.

The wake I left caused a whirlpool in the air above the store which completely demolished every bit of assorted rubbish in the place.

Seriously, I want to thank you, Mr. Editor, for the award. I'd like, also, to thank any fans that voted for me.

Eleven pages, ten pages, what's the dif? The length is O.K., at about this level.

Again that genius, the happy one, Lesser (that's me), takes first prize. He is a mental marvel. He is uncanny. His courage to say some of the things he does amazes me. His witness and helpfulness are great. He is truly a happy genius.

Following Lapin's clever way of rating, I will tell you what I thought of the letters.

Second (of course mine was first) is Alf Maxwell, Yehudi; third is Asimov, a fellow Brooklyn bum; and fourth is Conover, the scholar. The rest of the letters were about even, and going into them in detail would be only a waste of time.

Before I go on to the stories, I'd like to repeat something I said last time. Have a large novel in each issue. Or at least a medium sized one. Shorts and lets just can't be as good.

Hats off to females throughout the world! Why? Because one of their ranks has actually rated first among the authors in the latest planetary publication. (To those less gifted with the gray matter, I mean PLANET STORIES) Miss Brackett's "Child of the Sun" was by far the best. It was a little on the fantasy side due to a lack of explanation about the intelligence of the sun child, but pure fantasy is good now and then. The story did not have the usual namsy-pamsey-ness of her usual work. Pardon me.

Second, and good, verily so, was Brown's "Star-Mouse." This story was written in such a light and interesting style that it had to be good. It contained variety. Plus humor and pathos. More of Brown.

"Black Friar of the Flame" was an Asimovian masterpiece. Better, all kibitzers please note, than his very good letters. The best part, I guess, was his climaxing space battle. It was crammed with action of a very scientific type. Good.

Fourth is a distinct, and delightful surprise, "The Thing of Venus" by Wilbur Peacock. He usually handles shorts (I don't mean underwear) masterfully. But to do a novlet as good as this one, that is something else.

Raymond Van Houten's "The Last Martian" is good, too, in fact, they all were. It is, I think, a good thing to have a satirical story such as this one, once in a while.

Now comes an explosion. One of happiness. You have attained a superb position among s-f mags. Not only the best stories, you now have the best art, too.

With the addition of the super Leydenfrost and the excellent Musacchia you have reached this position. I have often admired Leydenfrost's work in Life and thought about, and mused over the possibility of him as an s-f artist. Several months ago, he did a mural for P.M. It was printed as a huge chart of America's Two Ocean Navy. It was wonderful. I suggest that you use Leydenfrost for pictures of super-futuristic machinery. I think that that is his excelling point.

Here is how I would have the art work done, if I were editor. It's a good thing I'm not.

A picture by Paul for the lead story. Two drawings by Leydenfrost. Possibly one by Musacchia, and one by Stevens. One by Bok, and two by Morey. I am at last deserting poor Lynch, Lynch him! There, I think that covers about everything.

MILT LESSER,
The Happy Genius.

O.K., PROFESSOR!

22 '79 Hall

Princeton, N. J.

DEAR EDITOR:

Although I have been a consistent reader of science-fiction literature of all types for about twelve years, this is my first letter of criticism to an editor. The fact that I have taken it upon myself to do so at this time is due partly to the fact that I see great possibilities in P.S. and partly to a very natural desire to at least make an attempt to win an original drawing.

Let me warn you first, warn you that I am what might be termed an "old timer." I still look with reverence to the days of "The Girl in the Golden Atom" and "The Skylark of Space." And in comparing the science-fiction of today with that of what I consider to be its "golden age," present attempts cannot but be found lacking for the most part. It is with the greatest regret that I say this, but I cannot help but feel that the majority of

the writers in this field today appear somewhat amateurish.

But I'll come to the point. I sometimes wonder just what are the chief factors which go into the making of a good science-fiction story. Of all there may be, I am at least certain of these four: originality, style, plausibility, and scientific basis. Of the combined term "science-fiction" the fiction is more important fraction by far. The other is merely descriptive, applied to designate to some extent the *type* of fiction. Of the four above, therefore, I should say that the first two were the more important by far, though all must be considered to some extent.

Judged by the above standards, I'm afraid a few of your stories fall a little short of the mark. Let us examine, for example, your last issue. The Asimov story was none too original in plot and not too cohesive in its development. Here is a man who should be capable of better work if he succeeds in becoming less conventional. And don't let them worry you about romance, Asimov. If you feel a story needs some, stick it in. Look what it did for Moskowitz. And the reader never met the lady fair. "Gods of Space" bears out what I have said of Cummings. He's still too good a writer to lose. The "Thing of Venus" centered around a time-worn plot, but it was well written and really not bad. Venus is one planet on which writers can let their imagination run rampant; science knows practically nothing of its surface conditions. "Child of the Sun" was very unscientific, pure fantasy if you like, but at the same time showed an originality which was most encouraging. Stories need not be scientific, but a certain degree of plausibility is sometimes appreciated. Your short stories were good. "The Star-Mouse" I considered excellent from every angle. In "The Pied Piper of Mars" there was just about the right amount of science, and, though not too original, it was well written and quite good. "The Last Martian" was—well, just another Mars story, a dying world viewed from a slightly different slant. I have saved Bond's "Ballad" for the last. It cannot be judged on the same basis as the above, and I suppose the only means of determining its value is by the reception it receives at large. I, for one, liked it, but would not trade a good story for poetry.

I'm afraid from now on my favorite artist is going to be Leydenfrost. This from the old timer! But my other favorites are Paul, Morey, and Wesso. Couldn't you get a little of Wesso? He's great on the space ships. I still remember some of his covers back in the early thirties. If by any chance I should win a picture, please make it Leydenfrost, Paul, or Leydenfrost in that order.

Your stories as a whole, however, are the best I have read in the science-fiction field today. Concerning a few kicks I have noticed about the lack of variety in a magazine dealing strictly with interplanetary stories—well, that's the title of the magazine, isn't it? You wouldn't read Western Stories for True Romance. Moreover, stories of this type are the oldest and highest form of science-fiction. And I, for one, love 'em. I wish you would pick up a few of the old timers if you can, however, such as Smith, Fearn, Keller, and Binder. Don't lose Cummings or Kummer.

For my votes on the letters, I'll take Maxwell, Knight, and Mrs. Wilson. Although I don't agree with Maxwell in his opinion of "Man of the Stars," I agreed most thoroughly with the rest of his letter. I am voting for Knight because I do agree with his opinion (in some ways) of "Man of the Stars"; at least it's nice to find another

person who can't help but think while he reads. And as for Mrs. Wilson, she sounds very much like another old timer to me. Whether she is or not, I like her taste.

And now I guess it's time for the "old timer" to retreat once more into his shell. In so doing let me add my voice to the general cry for a monthly P.S. Best of luck to you. You are doing a great job.

D. C. MONTGOMERY, JR.

THE LAST WORD

Willow Road,
Grove Park,
Roanoke, Va.

DEAR EDITOR:

Vizigrafans seem to have keyed themselves up over the Case of the Chrysanthemum-headed Martians, or the Bond vs. Wellman "feud."

The answer is the essence of simplicity. No feud. No bloodshed. No plagiarism by Bond or Wellman anger. But warm, good friendship all around. As was accurately transmitted by Vizigrafans Maxwell and Shaw, I asked Manly Wade Wellman's permission to depict my Martians, in all future stories, in accordance with the description he has made famous in his many, fine interplanetary tales of adventure. I received not only this permission, but M. W. W.'s determined assurance that this was the only true description of the Martian people! Who am I to sneer in the teeth of Truth?

In return for his kindness, Manly Wade Wellman is hereby and forevermore publicly granted permission to adopt and use as his own: neofabricoid bulgers, uranium time-traps, the velocity-intensifier invented by Lt. Lancelot Biggs, *perilens*, *permalloy*, *ekalastron*, *polarium*, and/or any and all devices, peoples or personages devised, invented or recorded by Lt. Biggs, Horsensense Hank Cleaver, Chip Warren, or their faithful chronicler,

NELSON S. BOND.

REQUIESCAT IN PACE

74 Clinton Ave.,
Westwood, N. J.

DEAR EDITOR:

May I say the last word on something?

Your correspondence column has been full of flattering attention to my flower-faced Martians. It seems that my valued friend, Nelson S. Bond, is being accused of Plagiarism, theft, whatnot, for using such petalled, slur-voiced characters. Let me get my two cents' worth into the discussion, thus:

Bond asked me long ago if I minded such a borrowing. This request came after considerable discussion between us of what form life might take on Mars. He had ideas, I had ideas. If the truth were known, I've probably appropriated some of his viewpoints. Anyway, I replied that I not only didn't mind, but was flattered. Because Bond doesn't need to borrow—as a writer of science-fiction, few can beat him or even tie him.

And if I am flattered, how much more so are the Martians! Because that's two of us here on Earth who know what Martians really look and sound like. And never mind how we found out.

More power to PLANET STORIES. It has a wide variety of attractions, and, so far as I can see, no dead timber at all.

Sincerely,
MANLY WADE WELLMAN.

How to Make YOUR Body Bring you FAME

... Instead of SHAME!

ARE YOU
Skinny?
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Will You Let Me
Prove I Can Make You
a New Man?

I KNOW what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs. I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

But later I discovered the secret that turned me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now I'd like to prove to you that the same system can make a NEW MAN of YOU!

What Dynamic Tension Will Do For You

I don't care how old or young you are or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vice-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice new, beautiful suit of muscle!

Only 15 Minutes A Day

No "ifs," "ands" or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, peevish? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details

about "Dynamic Tension" and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE MAN.

"Dynamic Tension" is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it's actually fun. "Dynamic Tension" does the work.

"Dynamic Tension" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvellous physical specimens—my way. I give you so gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through "Dynamic Tension," you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own body—watch it increase and multiply into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

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